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KEI SAZANE

Illustration By

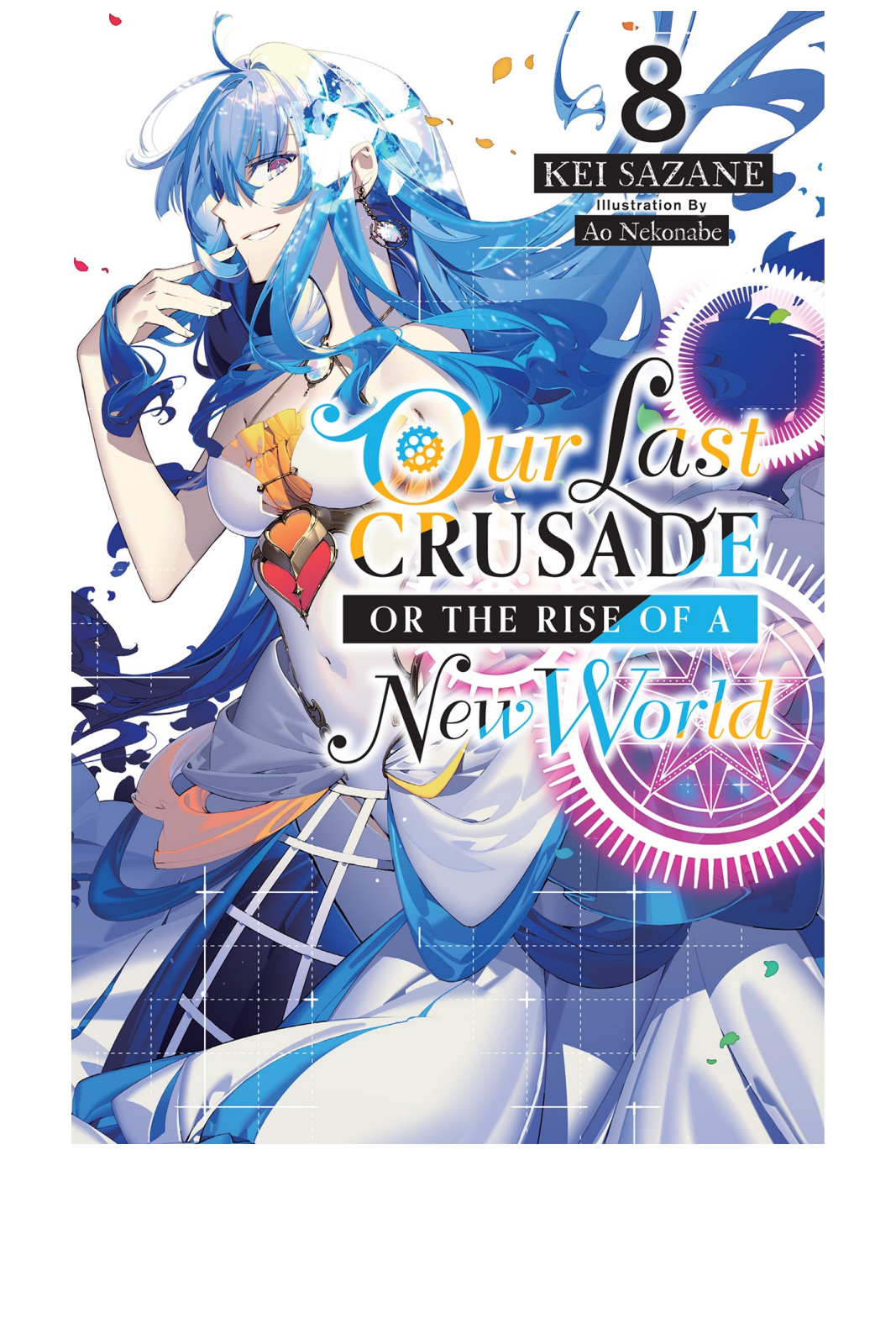
Ao Nekonabe

Our Last
CRUSADE

OR THE RISE OF A

New World





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Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

“I shall
show you
the most
glorious
power in
this world.”

Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX

Belongs to one of the three Nebulis bloodlines, the Hydra. Princess and candidate for the throne. Possesses a rare astral power, Glory. Used to be blond like Talisman, but the activation of her astral powers turned her hair blue.

☾ **The House of Zoa**
Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX

Belongs to one of the three Nebulae known as "Pure of blood and the golden child of the Zoa". Possesses the astral power of Thorne. Fought a death march against Mito the Immortal Emperor during the Imperial raid.

☼ **The House of Hydra**
Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX

"Someone's in a rush.
Had you requested an
appointment, I would
have prepared some tea."

"I will
eliminate
you.
Disappear
from my
sight."

"I will recover
Sisbell. Not from
the Imperial
forces, but from
the Hydra."

☆ **The House of Lou**
Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Second-oldest princess of the Nebulae Sovereignty. Overseeing royal affairs in place of the queen, so she was injured during the Imperial raid.



The flames
raged behind
the man
who had
once bared
his teeth
at Nebulis
Queen VII.

“Kneel. I’ll
only let you
live if you bow
your head
to me.”

Salinger

The transcendental sorcerer and the strongest mage. Previously jailed at the Orelgan prison spire for attempting to assassinate a queen. Currently at large.

Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

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Ao Nekonabe


NEW YORK

Copyright

Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World 8

KEI SAZANE

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KIMI TO BOKU NO SAIGO NO SENJO, ARUIWA SEKAI GA
HAJIMARU SEISEN Vol.8

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So Se ris, Ec wision nes ria feo.
Who do you shine for?

Is elmei flow recrey noi bie milve. Ende E yum tool bie synnel.
You view all the light in this world reflected through a looking glass.

Nevaliss, Shie-la So hec kfen. Ris sia sophia, Ec dio nes coda.
But do not be deceived. Do not stray from your path.

Utopia Powered by Machines

THE HEAVENLY EMPIRE



Iska

Member of Unit 907—Special Defense for Humankind, Third Division. Used to be the youngest soldier who ever reached the highest rank in the military, the Saint Disciples. Stripped of his title for helping a witch break out of prison. Wields a black astral sword to intercept astral power and its white counterpart to reproduce the last attack obstructed by its pair. An honest swordsman fighting for peace.



Mismis Klass

The commander of Unit 907. Baby-faced and often mistaken for a child, but actually a legal adult. Klutzy but responsible. Trusts her subordinates. Became a witch after plunging into a vortex.



Jhin Syulargun

The sniper of Unit 907. Prides himself on his deadly aim. Can't seem to shake off Iska, since they trained under the same mentor. Cool and sarcastic, though he has a soft spot for his buddies.



Nene Alkastone

Chief mechanic of Unit 907. Weapon-making genius. Mastered operation of a satellite that releases armor-piercing shots from a high altitude. Thinks of Iska as her older brother. Wide-eyed and loveable.

Risya In Empire

Saint Disciple of the fifth seat. Genius-of-all-trades. A beautiful woman often seen in a suit and glasses with dark green frames. Likes Mismis, her former classmate.

Nameless

Saint Disciple of the eighth seat. Covered from head to toe in an optical camouflage suit. Speaks in a digital voice. Started off in the assassination unit. Boasts physical prowess.



THE NEBULIS SOVEREIGNTY



Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Second-born princess of Nebulis. Leading candidate for the next queen. Strongest astral mage, who attacks with ice. Feared by the Empire as the Ice Calamity Witch. Hates all the backstabbing happening in the Sovereignty. Enraptured by fair fights against Iska, an enemy swordsman she met on the battlefield.

Rin Vispose

Alice's attendant. An astral mage controlling earth. Maid uniform conceals weapons for assassination. Skilled at deadly espionage. Hard to read her expressions, but has an inferiority complex about her chest.



Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX

Youngest princess of Nebulis. Aliceliese's little sister. Possesses Illumination, which reproduces footage of past events. Saved by Iska when she was captured in the Empire.



Lord Mask On

A member of the House of Zoa, which directly competes with the princesses for the throne. A conspirator whose true motives are unclear.



Kissing Zoa Nebulis

A powerful astral mage. Called the favorite child of the Zoa. Possesses astral power of thorns.



Salinger

Strongest sorcerer. Imprisoned for attempting to assassinate the queen. Currently at large.



Elletear Lou Nebulis IX

Eldest princess of Nebulis. Focused on traveling abroad. Often absent from the palace.

Prologue



Humanlike, at Minimum

In a zone neither part of the Empire nor the Nebulis Sovereignty...

This section of the world seemed to stretch on forever. Though the other side of this planet housed two superpowers—the Empire and the Sovereignty—their territories did not cover even half the landmass of the world.

It contained over a hundred countries and was plotted with neutral cities. Their forces would serve to buffer the all-out war between the superpowers.

...At least, that was the plan.



“Hmm. The wind is still cold at this hour of the day.”

Dawn at the dairy farm.

Elletear stood at the top of the hill, just past the border of the Nebulis Sovereignty, surrounded by dark green fields.

“We’ll wait for the transport plane here, meet in an hour, and return to Imperial territory.”

“Understood,” she replied, nodding back at the Imperial soldiers. A beautiful witch—Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

A darling, dignified facade. Tapered eyes that could seduce just about anyone. Emerald hair shone with flecks of gold, catching the light and billowing in the wind. A full chest, which made it hard to believe she was only twenty; cleavage peeking out from her dress, threatening to spill over.

Even the goddess of beauty would have envied her.

“And please don’t try anything while we wait for the plane.”

“I wouldn’t imagine it. I’ve been caught by the Empire, after all. I know my place,” Elletear replied, winking at the commander of the Imperial forces. It was like she’d been waiting for this situation.

“What a beautiful morning. It won’t be long until the Sovereignty is uprooted. Let it begin.” Elletear placed a hand on her chest.

There was a raw wound on it—the breast that attracted the attention of every man on this planet. A single injury to her flesh.

“The first princess Elletear, who protected the queen, had been cut by the Saint Disciple’s sword.”

A fatal wound, witnesses would have thought, including the queen and Aliceliese. They had seen the room painted red when the Saint Disciple’s sword sliced through her torso in the Queen’s Space.

“...It was excruciatingly painful to receive that blow.”

She circled the mark with her fingertips, almost lovingly. It had *already* started to heal. The wound on her chest was proof she was still human. The swiftness of her regenerative abilities was proof she was slowly becoming less human.

“...I imagine I’m perfectly in between, right now.” She chuckled quietly to herself.

The eldest princess was monitored by more than a dozen Imperial soldiers.

It was unprecedented; the Imperial forces had successfully captured a direct descendant of Nebulis—a purebred. In an hour, they would be transporting her to the Empire.

A seed of doubt, however, was already starting to plant itself in their minds.

How could such a beautiful woman be a witch?

Everyone in the Empire imagined witches to be vile, merciless creatures. Could these words be applied to the woman before them?

Visible grace and elegance. Breathtaking nobleness. They were clearly surprised when she showed no signs of the wickedness associated with witches.

“Excuse me,” Elletear called out. “You there.”

“...Me?!” The soldier widened his eyes in fear. “Wh-what?!”

“I must ask you for a favor.”

Elletear chuckled when he reached for his gun.

Then she looked up at him, almost pleadingly. “May I have some water? I’m feeling so hot and clammy.”

Elletear leaned forward, displaying her collarbone and what was farther down.

Her breasts were slick with sweat. The deep groove between them seemed to suck in the beads of perspiration. It was captivating.

“If you’d be so kind.”

“...As long as you don’t mind drinking water from the Empire. We don’t carry any from the Sovereignty.”

“Of course. It seems I’ll be under the care of the Empire for some time.”

He handed her a bottle of water.

Elletear cracked it open, poised to bring it to her lips when the communicator rang in her other hand.

“Hey, Elletear. I’m glad your communicator wasn’t confiscated.”



“Oh, good morning, Lord Talisman.”

Elletear seemed to have no issues speaking the name of the other person on the line, despite being surrounded by Imperial soldiers.

“I imagined you would be crossing the border soon.”

“Perfect timing. I was hoping to hear an update on things in the Sovereignty.”

“In total chaos, just as planned.”

Talisman. Head of the Hydra. Mastermind behind the plan to assassinate the queen. Orchestrator of the Imperial raid the night before.

“We’re preparing to make an announcement to the people in an hour: Never in Sovereign history have we seen more casualties than during this Imperial raid.”

“I’m sure that will rock the Sovereignty.”

The Empire had captured purebreds, including Elletear, but her abduction was part of the plan. It was all for the collapse of her motherland.

“It’s all going according to your plans, Elletear.”

“Yes...and that’s what matters most.” She brought the bottle to her lips.

Then a strange sensation washed over her. Her face paled. Sweat poured from her forehead. Her hand holding the communicator trembled.

“...Whew.”

“Oh? Your breath sounds strained.”

“I must have sustained too much of Growley’s Vice... In *another form*, it would have been no problem, but I am in a human body now.”

Growley. Head of the Zoa. A dreadful purebred. Possessor of Vice. He had managed to pick up on the schemes of the Hydra.

“I’ve given Lord Growley a narcotic—four times the normal dose to make sure he won’t wake up mid-transport. I imagine he won’t budge for several days... I was right to take him by surprise. Had I attacked him directly, he would have gotten me first.”

“You’ve eliminated one of our annoying enemies. Amazing powers, you have.”

“I’m a wicked witch, after all.” Sweat moistened her forehead. She closed her eyes. “I’m sure you’d be disillusioned had you seen me in *that form*, Lord Talisman.”

“Oh? But wasn’t that of your own volition?”

“Yes. Because I’m not powerful enough to be picky about my methods...”

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX was the weakest of the purebreds.

From the moment she was born, destiny dictated she would never become queen. Her astral power of Voice was useless.

This was the reason for her departure. She had left to put an end to the Paradise of Witches, a country that only valued those with “real” astral powers.

“Oh, yes. We’ve also secured Sisbell. I promise to treat her well—though we did knock her out to take her to the location.”

“I leave her in your capable hands.” Elletear gripped the communicator more firmly. “...Oh, and I almost forgot, Lord Talisman. Could you stay behind in the royal palace?”

“I intended to. Did you need something?”

“.....” After pausing for a breath, Elletear whispered, “Please inform the queen that the night is cold, and she should keep herself warm.”

“How very human of you.” Talisman let out a strained laugh from the other end. *“An emotion caught in between the human side of you—a daughter—and something else—a witch. Heartbreaking.”*

“I’m leaving my life with my family. Is it wrong to be a little sentimental at the end?”

The line went dead.

Elletear could feel the stares of the soldiers on her as she opened her eyes. She handed the communicator to a soldier and brought the water bottle to her lips.

A single sip was enough to make her indescribably nauseous. She clenched her back teeth.

Her body had rejected water—like it was telling her she could live *without* it.

She had already reached that point.

“Right...I must get used to this.” Elletear placed a hand on her sweaty chest and inhaled slowly.

There would come a time when she would no longer need to do that anymore.

“I must act humanlike, at minimum. Even if I’m a witch.”

The princess let out a quiet snort. Her smile was dazzling, but it sent a chill through the soldiers watching her from the side.

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen the Eight Great Apostles. I’m sure they will be surprised when they see me. I simply can’t wait.”

CHAPTER 1



Dawning the Night of the Witch Hunt—The Morning After

1

Dawn was starting to break on the night that seemed endless.

It had felt eternal. They gulped, intently watching the seconds tick on the clock, shivering against the chilling winds of night—

That was how Iska and his unit spent the night of the witch hunt.

The Paradise of Witches, the Nebulis Sovereignty. Central state. They were in a forest on the outskirts of the city.

“This was as much of a mess as I’d expected. The press and armed police have swarmed the royal palace. Not that we would ever step foot near it.”

The silver-haired sniper, Jhin, clutched a piece of paper. A newspaper extra, handed out at the station. It contained a report on the happenings in the palace, which matched the predictions of Unit 907.

First, the Imperial forces had invaded the royal palace overnight.

Second, the queen had been critically injured in a battle with a Saint Disciple and was currently undergoing emergency surgery.

Third, several members of the royal family had gone missing. Had the Empire taken them?

Each new detail in the report brought attention to something that had never happened before. That included the Imperial forces’ invasion of the palace and the capture of the Founder’s descendants, the purebreds.

“I knew everything would be pinned on the Imperial forces...,” Iska said bitterly as he held the same newspaper supplement as Jhin.

As reported in the article, it was true Imperial forces had attacked the palace. There was something else, however, that Iska knew hadn’t been reported accurately.

“There were two people behind the coup. That was Elletear and you—the one who invited the Imperial forces here.”

The raid had been abetted by the Hydra, one of the royal families in the Nebulis Sovereignty. The Hydra’s plan to assassinate the queen...shared a common goal with the Empire’s plot to invade the nation.

...In any other circumstance, an invasion by the Imperial forces would have been great news for our unit.

...The Sovereignty is our adversary. It would mean we’d successfully invaded an enemy nation.

Except Unit 907 had agreed to protect Princess Sisbell. The people of the Sovereignty believed that even Sisbell’s kidnapping—orchestrated by the head of the Hydra—was the Empire’s doing.

...A groundless accusation! Not a single citizen of the Sovereignty had realized that the Hydra, royalty in flesh and blood, were after the lives of the queen and princess.

“Iska.” Commander Mismis, who had been peering into the woods, turned around. “All we can hope is that they’ll tell us once they know where Sisbell is, right?”

“Yes. We just have to believe them,” Iska answered.

Sisbell hadn’t been abducted by the Imperial forces, but by the Hydra—by fellow members of the royal family. Unit 907 knew that, as well as...

“You were right...until the very end. I was the one tricked...”

“I’ll go after the House of Hydra. There might be proof...”

...Princess Aliceliese.

The night before, Iska and Alice had tried to engage in another death match. Currently, Iska imagined she was going after the Hydra to find her younger sister’s whereabouts.

“How’s it going over there, Nene?”

“Hmm... Foot traffic is higher, since the day is breaking. I bet some soldiers from Hydra are lurking in the crowds. I imagine they’re waiting for us to arrive.” Nene was standing next to Commander Mismis and holding a pair of binoculars.

They couldn’t be careless or be spotted in the woods. They were certain the Hydra had sent assassins as far as the roads of the countryside.

“Iska, should we keep lying low here?” Nene asked.

“For the time being. But we can’t stay in the woods forever. I think it’d be better for us to move somewhere else to wait...but I’m

interested in hearing what you all think.” Iska directed his question at the five girls who had been motionless and quiet during this conversation.

Servants from the Lou family villa. Yumilecia, Ashe, Noel, Sistia, and Nami. The five girls had been pursued by mercenaries from the Hydra. Their eyes were glued to the newspaper, blazing with unbridled rage.

“The headline...,” whispered the eldest of them, Yumilecia, voice shaking.

She balled up the thin paper.

“*Is a New Queen in Order?*...Tell me you’re joking. Lady Sisbell’s kidnappers have gone too far!”

A news organization only in name. This article had been published by a company colluding with the Hydra, financially speaking.

In other words, it was a coup.

They were attempting to rush the conclave and the selection of a new queen by pinning the Imperial raid on the royal family currently in charge. The five girls could see through Talisman’s scheme just by reading the article.

“I don’t blame you for being upset,” Jhin said, growing impatient. “But we don’t care what happens to the Sovereignty and its administration. We only promised to get back Sisbell. So, where can we hide for the time being?”

“...We should return to the villa,” Yumilecia responded for the five servants. “Like you said, we have no provisions in the woods—no food, no water. And though I am loath to admit it, we need time to rest and recuperate...”

“We can’t go back there.” Jhin shook his head. “It was demolished by that witch—Vichyssoise—and her astral powers. People are going to be all over the grounds, trying to figure out what happened. I think it’s safe to assume the soldiers from the Hydra will be among them. If they see us, they’ll claim we’re stragglers and capture us.”

“No, not the villa. We want to go to the safe house behind it.” Yumilecia was undaunted. “There’s a large forest behind the estate, an area also owned by the Lou. It has a storehouse filled with provisions. We can spend several days there in safety.”

“...Are you sure?” asked Commander Mismis, the leader of their unit, in place of Jhin. “But isn’t that...?”

“Yes. An evacuation site in case we go to war with the Empire. But we need your help. So we’ve reached the decision to lead you there out of necessity.” Yumilecia turned around.

The four servants behind her stood up simultaneously as though waiting for her cue.

“You promised you would prioritize recovering Lady Sisbell above all else. If you betray us—”

“You can have my life,” Iska finished for them.

The servants stared at him with a look that could have been mistaken for animosity. Iska didn’t flinch and answered without hesitation, “We wouldn’t stay in the Sovereignty if we weren’t prepared to put everything on the line to save her. I mean, we could have met up with the Imperial forces to escape with them the other night if we wanted to.”

“.....”

“Am I wrong?”

“I suppose you have a point. The fact that you’ve stayed with us is enough to show us that you intend to save Lady Sisbell.” Yumilecia’s lips formed a tiny smile. “We’ll lead you to the safe house. Follow us.”

2

The royal palace of Nebulis.

The Planetary Stronghold. A castle hosting a concentrated number of Sovereign leaders.

It was allegedly constructed by ancient astral arts of crystallized astral powers. Regular fire would not do any harm to the halls. Even damage dealt by a cannonball would be restored overnight.

Toppling it was an impossible feat. For a century, the palace had represented something indestructible. And now, the hundred years of truth had crumbled.

“It was bound to happen...”

The Queen’s Space was the sacred room constructed of stately stone pillars and colorful stained glass, blanketed in carpets the color of wine.

A once *sacred space*, Alice corrected mentally, sighing.

The sun cast light on the changed scene before them. The carpet had been ripped to shreds. The stained glass panels on the second floor were shattered, unrecognizable. Even the stone pillars had snapped. This was the aftermath of the battle between the queen and the Saint Disciple of the first seat, Joheim.

The outcome of their fight, still fresh on their minds.

“.....” Alice avoided looking at the dark bloodstain on the floor—blood shed by the queen and her older sister, Elletear.

This was the nature of war. No battle ended with no blood shed. Aliceliese might have known that in her heart, but she wasn’t too keen on looking at it directly.

“Princess Alice! We have finished extinguishing the fires on the

grounds!" One of the royal guards ran into the Queen's Space, out of breath. "There is still smoke, but there is no threat of the fire spreading. At present, we are continuing our recovery efforts and searching for enemies on the grounds."

"Thank you. We would be in danger if there were still Saint Disciples in our midst. Please have the Planetary Domiciles accompany the search teams."

"Understood!" The guard bowed before scurrying off, other soldiers in tow. Alice and Rin watched over them.

"Tell me what you're thinking, Rin," Alice requested.

"I think it's very likely that the Imperial forces have retreated." Rin stared out into the grounds through the broken windows on the second floor. Her cheeks were still sooty. "Several members of the royal family went missing overnight. Unfortunately, we must assume they have fallen into the hands of the Imperial forces."

"...The Empire would consider those spoils of battle."

"If they captured purebreeds, they would no longer have a reason to stay in enemy territory. But I'm sure they're after something else. An ulterior motive."

"...Yes." She gritted her teeth.

It had all happened in the span of a single night. In just a few hours, the Nebulis Sovereignty had suffered the worst loss in its entire history. At present, Alice was aware of at least four members of the royal family who had been victims of the attack.

One person was out of commission:

—Queen Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX: In surgery to stitch up her left arm.

Three were missing:

—House of Lou, Eldest Princess Elletear: Captured by Imperial army.

—House of Lou, Youngest Princess Sisbell: Captured by Imperial army at the villa.

—Head of the Zoa, Growley—MIA. Witnesses wanted.

These weren't small casualties.

It was grave enough to bring the decline of the country upon them. Now that the Empire had caught purebreeds, there was no telling what their next move might be.

...But there's something happening under the surface.

...And Rin and I are the only ones in the castle who know this.

There was someone behind the plot—traitors who were just as despicable to Alice as the Empire. They were the real villains. They had both betrayed the queen and abducted her little sister, Sisbell.

“This Imperial raid was not just orchestrated by the Empire.”

“The masterminds behind the coup are the Hydra. The head of household attacked and demolished the estate with mages disguised as Imperial soldiers.”

No one would doubt the story that the Imperial forces had taken her sister.

...I mean, I was tricked into thinking that, too.

...Had Iska not told me, I would have directed all my rage at the Empire.

The night before, she had initiated another death match with the Imperial swordsman Iska. The battle had been ruthless, and she hadn't held back. Though it couldn't even compare to her ideal crusade, she hadn't been able to stop herself.

“Let's stop.”

“I don't want to fight you when you've forgotten who you are, Alice. This isn't the time for us to engage in battle.”

“.....”

“Lady Alice? Lady Alice, are you well?” asked one of the royal guards, which brought her back to her senses.

“Oh yes.”

She had only meant to linger on the memory for a moment, but it seemed more time had elapsed than she'd anticipated.

“My apologies, but you seem exhausted...,” the guard continued.

“No, I'm fine. I was just lost in thought.” She manufactured a smile.

In actuality, she *was* tired. It was rare even on the battlefield to be actively ready for an entire evening. After giving orders in the queen's place, Alice's energy reserves were totally depleted.

“...Right. Would you be kind enough to fetch me a glass of water? My throat is parched from all this talking.”

“At once.”

“And some sugar and caffeine tablets,” Alice added.

The sugar and stimulant would wake her up and ward off her fatigue. There was no time to rest.

...First, I need to secure the inner palace. Then I need to prepare an announcement to give to the people.

...And I need to come up with a plan to save Sisbell in secret.

She gritted her teeth. With the queen out of commission due to an injury, Alice was the only one who could do anything from the House of Lou.

“Is Alice here?”

Clack... A hard heel echoed through the Queen’s Space, marking the entrance of a man in black. A member of the royal family, he hid his face with a metal mask. A counsel to another royal bloodline, the Zoa.

“Lord Mask? What happened to you...?” Alice started to say.

His clothes were in tatters. Alice doubted her eyes when she saw bloodstains. Had he been battling with Imperial forces? The lacerations all over his body, however, had not come from bullets. It looked as though he had been sliced up by a sharp sword, but if that had been the case, the wounds would have been much deeper.

What in the world had harmed him then?

“Oh, I was just dancing. My partner was a mischievous lady.”

“...Was she a Saint Disciple?”

“Who can say? We didn’t have the manners to exchange names. I did make some advances, but she politely turned me down. She must have left the castle already,” Lord Mask replied, looking quite serious. “I have an urgent message for you, the *acting* queen. We’ve finished our search within the Moon Spire. No Imperial forces remain. We’re about to check the hidden cameras.”

“I’m relieved to see you’re safe.”

Alice wasn’t just saying that. She meant it. They might have been feuding behind the scenes, but they still were blood relatives. She didn’t want *anyone* to get hurt.

“Safe? I think you’ve misunderstood the situation,” Lord Mask replied, trampling all over her hopes. His voice was at such a volume that Alice and Rin turned toward him in surprise. Even the royal guards turned their attention to him.

“Our palace has been invaded by Imperial forces. Our gardens charred, the blood of our brethren spilled, several people from our family missing—including the head of my household, Growley.” Lord Mask spread his arms, like he was appealing to the royal guards. “And most importantly, our people are stewing in hate and growing restless. And you think we’re *safe*?”

“.....”

“The Zoa have counseled the Lou—more times than I can count. We pleaded with you to let us attack the Empire. Our demands were denied, and as a result, the Imperial forces drew first blood,” Lord Mask said. “So the blame falls on our queen.”

She didn’t even need to ask him what his goal was. That much was obvious—the succession of the queen.

“Then again...” A sigh escaped from the gaps between the mask and his face. “Now isn’t time for this conversation. As one of the Zoa, it’s my top priority to find the head of the house. After all, *something*

isn't adding up."

"...I know he has had a long history serving in the military as an astral mage."

Growley—the possessor of second-generation Vice. There wasn't a single person in this place who didn't know about his impressive record.

...I doubt he was captured by the Imperial soldiers.

...Even I have a hard time imagining a Saint Disciple apprehending him.

This explained why the Zoa were concerned. They couldn't go against the queen or Alice now. Without their leader, it would be unwise to make an enemy out of the Lou.

"By the way—" Lord Mask started to say, but then he stopped immediately and tilted his head.

Another person had appeared in the Queen's Space.

A gallant man decked in a white suit had made himself known, walking toward them with relaxed strides.

"Lady Alice," Rin whispered.

"I know, Rin. I should be patient, right?" Alice clenched her hand into a fist and held back her anger. The one to appear in front of her was a member of the Hydra.

"I'm so glad to see you safe, my dear," said Talisman, the head of household, voice clear. "And I'm indebted to the efforts of the royal guards."

His chiseled face was dastardly and suave. He didn't forget to extend his thanks to both Alice and the royal guards.

...Arrogance, personified.

...How dare he? After all he did—abducting my sister and ushering the Imperial forces into our country.

She felt something other than anger—something like awe.

It was perfect. The mastermind behind the plot to overthrow the country had disguised his fangs, devoting himself to playing the role of head of household. How much experience did he need to have to accomplish such a feat?

"Alice, my dear." Talisman was staring straight at her. "I offer you my condolences, seeing that Elletear and Sisbell have gone missing."

"Ngh."

"They're precious members of our family," Talisman continued. "I will lend you my powers to find them."

"...I appreciate that."

How could he say such a thing after all that he'd done? Had Rin not been there beside her to comfort her, Alice would have flown into a rage.

—Hold back for the time being.

There was no official proof of Talisman's plan. If she tried to expose his wrongdoings right now, her subordinates would have a hard time believing her. Alice bit her lip and tried to bear it.

"I am so pleased to hear you're safe, Lord Talisman. Also, there was something I wanted to ask you," Lord Mask cut in. For once, his words were a saving grace. "I still don't have the whole story. It seems that the *Solar Spire* alone had escaped from the Imperial attack. Or so I've heard."

"Yes. They concentrated their attacks on the Queen's Palace. Had I realized their goal earlier, I would have been able to spare more of my own personnel. Pity."

"....."

There was a moment of silence. Lord Mask and Talisman. The two men—both rather tall—were facing each other, tension in the air between them.

"And one other thing. Our head of household, Growley, has been missing since dawn," Lord Mask continued. "Do you have any clue as to what has happened to him?"

"No, but I could send out a search party," Talisman replied. "If I learn of anything, I will notify you immediately."

"Thank you. In that case, I will be taking my leave."

Lord Mask was the first to retreat.

Though the conversation had been a short one, it gave Alice some clues she could work with.

...Does he know?

...The Zoa must suspect the Hydra were involved in the Imperial forces' attack, too.

But they had no proof, so they couldn't do anything about it.

They were in the same position as Alice. The only difference was that Alice was certain of the culprit while the Zoa were still piecing it together.

"Well, Alice. We'll overcome these unprecedented times together," Talisman offered.

"...Yes," Alice replied.

Talisman left the Queen's Space. Alice was annoyed by his confident stride.

"Princess Alice, the queen has woken up!" called out one of the medical unit nurses clothed in white, running in their direction. "We've finished operating on her arm. She is still under anesthetic, but I don't believe that'll get in the way of a short conversation between the two of you."

"Thank you. I will head over right away." Alice exchanged a look with Rin and nodded. "Rin..."

"I'll do things according to plan." Rin bowed and passed by Alice's

side.

She was going to the villa. Iska had claimed that assassins had destroyed the structure, and she wanted to go see it with her own eyes.

...I'm counting on you, Rin.

...Make sure neither the Hydra nor the Zoa suspect where you're going.

"Lady Alice, to the queen's room," the nurse urged.

"Yes," Alice answered. "Take me there immediately."

Nebulis Sovereignty. Star Spire.

The private quarters of the head of household for the Lou: the Stardust Skyscraper. This space had been passed along from the first-generation leaders of the Nebulis Sovereignty down to the Lou.

In the living room, Queen Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX sat staring out the window. She looked even better than Alice had expected. The overnight surgery was a success. Her left arm was wrapped in bandages.

"Mother..."

"Pathetic. I'm not even in the mood to make excuses." The queen's voice almost came out like a sigh. "I thought I vowed to fulfill my duties as queen... When did I become so weak?"

She covered her left arm with her right. The queen turned to her daughter with slightly red eyes.

...Were you crying, Mother?

...Or is that because you were under anesthetic for so long?

Alice assumed the queen had heard about the events of the night before: that her eldest daughter had been hauled off by a Saint Disciple, that her youngest daughter had been attacked when the Imperial forces had invaded the family villa.

"Doctors, could I have a moment alone with my mother?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." They filed out of the room.

After listening to their footsteps disappear down the hall, Alice locked the door.

"Mother, there is something important I must tell you."

"...I'm prepared for anything. Especially given the circumstances, I know it can't be good. I'm even prepared for my own daughter to reprimand me for my conduct."

"It isn't good news." Alice looked straight at her mother, who let out a self-deprecating chuckle. "But it could possibly turn this whole situation on its head."

"What?"

"I will recover Sisbell. Not from the Imperial forces, but from the Hydra."

“...Alice? What did you just say?” Life seemed to return to the queen’s voice. Her once emotionless eyes gleamed and steadily regained focus as she scanned her daughter’s face.

“The Hydra brought the Imperial forces upon us, Mother.”

“.....”

“Their troops attacked our villa costumed as Imperial forces. Five servants witnessed it, and they are safe.”

“...Alice, can I really trust this information?”

“I swear it on my right to succeed the throne. You will know for yourself once you see the five of them,” Alice told the queen, who pondered what her daughter had said.

Alice kept going, her voice firm. “And we have circumstantial evidence. We can’t assume that the Solar Spire just so happened to escape the Imperial raid last night. And you must know, Mother, that the attack also released the witch—Vichyssoise—from her cell.”

“—————”

“The Hydra must have known about the invasion. Planned it years in advance, in fact.”

“...Both sides will resort to anything, it seems.” After a while, the queen let out a sigh. “I also suspected the Hydra were involved in the coup. I was too optimistic to believe the matter would be settled by Sisbell’s return, but I never would have suspected they would call in the Imperial forces to stop her...”

“Yes. All we have is circumstantial evidence, and that includes the eyewitness reports of our servants. We don’t have decisive evidence that can bring them down.”

“So that’s why they took Sisbell.” The queen nodded.

Sisbell’s Illumination could reproduce the past in three dimensions. If they could just recover the youngest princess, they would be able to show that the Hydra were colluding with the Imperial forces, which would redeem the Lou. The administration under the queen would regain its foothold.

“Thank you, Alice. I see the situation now, though I do not have all the details. And coming back to your initial point, we *will* retrieve Sisbell... Of course I would do anything I could for my daughter, even if it wasn’t in my best interest.”

“On that point, Mother, I seek your wisdom and insight.”

Alice looked out the window, staring at the Queen’s Palace—a domineering presence—and the Solar Spire, hazy behind it.

“Do you have any idea where Sisbell might be held?”

Everything was white.

The floor, the ceiling, the walls—all painted over in untarnished white. Even the bed on which she had been laid was the same color.

“...How long are the Hydra going to keep me cooped up in here?”

Her voice bounced off the walls.

In a doorless bedroom, Sisbell started yet another monologue in her glorified cell, which was only a few yards wide in all directions.

Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX. Her face was as cute as a heroine from a fairy tale. Her strawberry-blond hair, lustrous. Her large eyes were determined, princess-like.

“I won’t bow down. This is nothing...compared to the cold Imperial jails.”

She had a bed. A bed that was even outfitted with impeccably clean sheets. This was hospitable, unlike her time in the Empire.

...They’ll keep me locked away here.

...But they would never rough up a princess. Otherwise, they would have to answer for that.

So, *that* was the purpose of the room. But what did they plan on doing with her?

“I thought they were attempting to silence me, but if they’re keeping me hostage, that can’t be their plan...”

Were they planning to use her as a hostage against the Lou if push came to shove?

“O-oh, right!” Sisbell snapped her head up. Why hadn’t she thought of it until now? “I just need to use Illumination to see everything that happened up until I was brought to this room...!”



Who from the Hydra brought her here? She could work with that bit of information and figure out how to escape from this doorless room.

“O planet.” She planted her hand on her chest, placing it slightly above her small breasts. The astral crest started to emit a faint light.

“Please show me your pa—?!”

Sisbell’s breath caught, unable to continue.

A door had appeared right in front of her eyes—oblong and rising from the pristine walls that once held nothing.

No, wait. Correction: The door had *always* been there.

...*Was I just too dense to notice it?*

...*Was this a trick to prevent me from noticing it or was it concealed with camouflage using an advanced astral power?*

They must have done it while she’d been unconscious. She hated to admit she hadn’t noticed they had addled her mind using astral power.

“Don’t play games with me. Now that your power has worn off, I imagine you intend to show yourself. Come out!” She pointed at the door.

The door creaked open in front of her.

3

Central state. Woodlands.

They were at an abandoned storehouse, seemingly left unused for decades.

Iska doubted his eyes when he saw past the rusted door.

“...So it just *looks* like an old shed on the outside.”

The room within was divided by thick concrete walls. Iska spotted a state-of-the-art communications device inside. The center of the room functioned as a meeting space, and a pile of boxes storing emergency rations and water were stacked in the corner. He would have mistaken it for an Imperial base.

“You’ve got a war room? Even Imperial conference rooms aren’t this nice,” Jhin observed, locking his gaze on a concrete wall lined with machine guns.

Even now that the villa had been destroyed, it was still possible to continue commanding the military from this safe house without any obstacles.

“Whoa! Hey, Commander, this communications device runs on a seventh-generation G system. It’s the newest type of wireless device capable of driving an unmanned car up to sixty miles—with super-low

latency. They don't have these anywhere in the Empire except in the capital—" Nene started to say.

"Please remember the situation we're in." The servants stared her down.

"...I'm sorry," Nene uttered before becoming silent, dejected.

"This is the safe house operated by the Lou. Since it's in the woods, it's a one-story structure, but there are two basement levels, so it's decently spacious. However..." The oldest servant, Yumilecia pointed to the stairs at the back that led down to the basement. "I think it's obvious that this building houses Sovereign secrets—ones we don't want anyone from the Empire knowing. Especially in any areas below us now."

"Noted," Iska said. "We won't go into the basement; we won't even go near the stairs."

He looked beside him. Once Commander Mismis nodded, Iska looked back at the servants. "Does that work for you?"

"Yes. I believe you've already realized that everything you say and do at this base will be under surveillance, so the royal family can review it at a later time."

A surveillance camera glared from a corner of the ceiling. Iska had noticed it the moment he'd stepped into the safe house.

"You know what they say: Do nothing suspicious, and there will be nothing to suspect. Please refrain from doing anything that would make us question your conduct."

"As long as you behave, we all intend to treat you as guests. It's what Lady Sisbell ordered, after all," said another girl who had stepped forward from behind Yumilecia. She held clean towels in both her hands. "We will lend you rooms. They are all en suites, so please use the showers while we still have time."

"While we have time?"

"Miss Rin will arrive in two hours." The servant was facing away from them, gaze fixed on the communications device on the table. "I'm sure she will have directions on how to rescue Lady Sisbell."



"First, I will hear what they have to say. Then I will give Lady Alice an update..."

These woods were owned by the House of Lou.

Rin dragged a suitcase along as she quickly walked down the trails that had not been maintained for the past few decades. She had changed into a simple black suit before leaving the palace and taken a taxi to get to the outskirts, rather than take an official car. From there,

she had walked through the countryside.

All were precautions to dodge prying eyes.

There would be Talisman's soldiers undercover around the palace and near the villa. These measures were taken to avoid being spotted by him.

"...Those damned Hydra. Now they've really done it."

Only minutes before she had entered the woods, she had caught a glimpse of the Lou Erz mansion over the wall. Rin found herself speechless. The castle had been destroyed beyond recognition. In a little under a day, the stately residence had become rubble, a shell of what it was the night before.

"...This is the work of Vichyssoise."

The castle caved in as though a cannonball had shot through it. Based on the debris from the damage, the witch must have used her trump card, the Magic Shot of Corpses. Rin could tell by the destruction: The estate had been attacked the night before by the assassins from the Hydra, led by Talisman.

...I suppose the silver lining is that the servants are safe.

...Though I hate to be indebted to that Imperial swordsman.

She reminded herself she needed the former Saint Disciple's help at this moment.

"...I hate to ask him for anything."

But the priority was rescuing Princess Sisbell. Rin had been reluctant to agree with Alice's point that they needed Iska's help; ultimately, she had agreed to do it out of necessity.

Rin hated the Hydra as much as she hated the Imperial forces who had invaded the royal palace.

"You'll see, Hydra. We'll make you pay," Rin told herself just as a rusted storehouse came into view. It was the safe house unknown to the other royal bloodlines. "It must have been a full year since I've been here..."

She used a spare key to open the metal lock. Beyond the door, which had been camouflaged with rust, was a concrete room outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment.

"It's me. I've arrived earlier than... Huh?"

Rin blinked. She didn't see anyone in the meeting area in front of her nor any sign of the five servants, Iska, or the rest of his unit. The half-empty water bottles were the only indication they were somewhere in the place.

"They must be meeting in a back room."

She had already told them she was coming. They had to be discussing ways to rescue Sisbell in anticipation of her arrival.

"I see. Not bad for Imperial subjects. I might even say that's praiseworthy."

Rin hauled her suitcase farther into the room. She could hear movement behind the many doors down the hallway and placed a hand on one of them.

“It’s me. I’m coming in.”

“Huh? Is that voice...Rin?!”

It was Iska speaking beyond the door. She *knew* they were meeting in one of these rooms.

“W-wait! Wait a sec! I’m—”

“What? I’m coming in.”

She opened the door to find Iska, as expected. Except...her vision went white when she saw an *unfamiliar* side of him.

“Um...I was taking a shower...”

“_____”

He wasn’t wearing a thing. As he claimed, he must have gone to freshen up.

A girl of tender age, Rin wasn’t unfazed upon seeing a naked boy of the same age. He looked more muscular without his clothes. And his black hair clung to his forehead, slick from the water, making him seem more manly than—

“Wait! No!” With a flushed face, Rin threw the suitcase she held at Iska. “Wh-wh-what do you think you’re doing?! I—I’m...seventeen years old! A young maiden! And you’re an exhibitionist!”

“You were the one who walked in on *me*!”

“This is *your* fault!”

“In what world?!” Iska rushed behind a chest of drawers. “We were attacked by assassins last night. If we don’t clean out our wounds, they’ll fester!”

“...Anyway, put on some clothes. I’ll turn away.” Rin could hear the quiet swishing of his clothes, which made her more embarrassed. “I have something to tell you. You can listen while you dress.”

She cleared her throat. “Lady Alice informed me of the events that transpired at the villa last night. I’m here to confirm the story with the servants.”



“...Uh-huh.”

“And something else: a personal question for you.”

It was a thing Rin was curious about, a question beyond their social standing—one that she wanted to ask the swordsman as a fellow fighter.

“Is it true that you battled Lady Alice last night?”

“.....” The boy behind her was quiet. “It’s true. Alice was convinced that everything was the fault of the Imperial forces. And she said she couldn’t forgive me, either.”

“So Lady Alice must have intended to actually stop you.”

“She didn’t hold back. She was merciless.”

“...I see.” A sigh—relieved and bittersweet—escaped from Rin’s lips.

“What’s the sigh for?”

“I’m relieved. I’ll be honest with you; I was worried Lady Alice had taken such a liking to you that she would have held back.”

Rin turned around and found Iska, fully dressed, in the middle of a shrug.

“Yeah, right. You have nothing to be worried about. She’s not that soft, and I wouldn’t want our relationship to be any other way.”

“That’s why I said I was relieved. And this is contradictory, but...” Rin shrugged, just like Iska. “I can’t believe you made it out of the fight unscathed. At this moment, it gives me some hope, knowing how stupidly strong you are.”

“...Because of the thing with Sisbell?”

“Obviously. To rescue her from the Hydra, I’m willing to ask for your help—circumstantially.”

She picked up her suitcase from where it had been thrown to the ground. Rin unzipped it, revealing it to be empty.

“Put all of your belongings in here,” she ordered. “We’ll be going on the move.”

“Again? But we just got here.”

“We’re too far from the royal palace. It’s not suitable for infiltrating the Hydra’s base.”

“Gotcha...”

“We’re leaving for the city. End of story. Got that, guys?” Rin turned to the open door.

Beyond it were the servants, who had clustered around it once they heard her talking, as well as Commander Mismis, Nene, and Jhin.

“We will prepare to depart immediately. There is no telling how long Lady Sisbell will remain unharmed.”

INTERMISSION



And the World Goes On—Two Days After

It had been thirty-six hours since the night of the witch hunt that haunted the Nebulis Sovereignty. Under the command of the Saint Disciples, the elite units of the Imperial military stopped at a neutral city: Shralba.

The main street was as crowded as it was on any other afternoon, except the armed military police were also there, communicating over their devices.

“Hmm? Did the town drunk pick a fight with somebody? Hey, Risya? Doesn’t it feel a little tense for a neutral city?”

“As if you don’t know. *We* caused this.”

“Because of that attack? But the neutral city never has anything to do with the war between the Empire and the Sovereignty.”

“Shh, Mei. People might overhear you.”

Two women strolled down the main road.

One was tan and short. Her hair was a wreck, and her canines peeked from her mouth, which gave her a feline look. Next to her was a tall woman with black hair and black-rimmed glasses.

“Why did we even bother changing in the airlift if you’re just going to spill our secrets? We’re supposed to be your average citizens. No connection to the Empire or the Sovereignty.”

“Sure, sure, I’ll go along with your little game.”

Mei wore a thin tank top and short-shorts—giving her the appearance of a student on vacation. No one would guess she was a Saint Disciple of the third seat, part of the highest military rank within the Imperial forces.

“So, Risya, what do you think of my outfit?”

“It suits you. But I would have loved to see you in a skirt or dress while we’re in disguise.”

“No way. Skirts always flip up.”

“Hmm? Are you implying you would be embarrassed if a breeze revealed your underwear?”

“No. They just get caught in tree branches and make it hard to swim.”

“...I don’t get you sometimes. I don’t think normal girls climb trees or swim in skirts.”

“Seriously?” Mei asked in shock, staring at her colleague. “By the way, that suit looks slick on you.”

“I usually wear suits around the Lord.”

The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat—Risya—looked like a typical businesswoman.

“Hmm? Did you style your hair differently, too?”

“Did you just notice? ...It’s been like this since we boarded the plane.” Risya’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. Her long, black hair was pinned up at the back of her head. She looked like a smart secretary with her suit and sharp eyes. “I always style it this way when I’m by the Lord’s side or conducting official business. I only let my hair down when I’m in battle or relaxing at home. Wait, Mei, don’t tell me you never noticed!”

“Ha-ha-ha. I’m bad with details.”

“...Well, it’s fine. I knew that, anyway.” Risya sighed before touching her fingertips to her cheek. “I can play dress-up, but it won’t disguise this wound across my face. I know.”

Her fingers caressed the bandage on her cheek. Her reinforced plastic lenses were also cracked—what was left after a death match.

These two Saint Disciples had attacked the palace and fought against descendants of the Founder. Traces of blood peeked out from Mei’s tank top.

“I’m jealous that you heal so quickly, Mei. I want to go back to Imperial territory as soon as I can. I need to repair my glasses.”

“I think I remember you saying the purebred punched through them.”

“These lenses should be able to repel bullets. I guess it’s a small price to pay, seeing that I was up against a beast.”

As they continued speaking in hushed voices, Risya and Mei walked down the main drag of the neutral city. They stopped by stalls to buy food on Mei’s whim.

“Risya, this roast beef sandwich is to die for.”

“Didn’t you *just* eat in the transport?”

“Maybe. But this is different.” Mei nibbled on the bread. “The guys are waiting for us on the plane; you know, if they came with us, they could have enjoyed this sandwich—and not deal with disgusting military rations.”

“Nameless is still getting his arm treated. Joheim is keeping guard over the captured purebreds. And we need to finish our job. We didn’t stop for a bite to eat. Oh, you over there. One for me, please.” Risya tossed a coin at the shop assistant. In exchange, she took one of the many newspapers he had been handing out. “Oh, there’s one over

there, too. Mei, could you dash over there and buy the newspaper on that side of the street?"

"Mmm...hmm? Sure! Uh, did you say you wanted a cup of juice?"

"Not in the slightest. Look, we need to collect reports for the Lord or we'll be in for a scolding. We might be done fighting, but the Lord does care about what the people are saying."

They were collecting as many newspapers and magazines as they could. That was the reason why they had landed the transport and stopped at the neutral city.

A war between the Empire and the Sovereignty. The entire world feared the two superpowers were heading in this direction. A full-blown war risked collapse on both sides, and its destruction could push into the neutral cities.

"The nations that are uneasy might use this opportunity to ally with the Sovereignty. To prevent that, we need to keep an eye on public opinion."

"So? What's actually written on the papers?"

"*Are We on the Brink of World War?* it says. We predicted the neutral cities are shocked by the news of us launching an attack against the palace."

The Imperial forces had successfully captured the Founder's descendants.

That was a first in their century-long history. It was no exaggeration to say it had turned the war in favor of the Imperial forces.

"Some strategists are predicting the Sovereignty will retaliate. At least, based on this article."

The century-long period of waiting was over. From now on, it was war. The Imperial forces would send state-of-the-art weapons of destruction to the front lines, and the Sovereignty would mobilize descendants of the Founder, who had yet to be seen before.

"...All right." Risya bundled the newspapers together and looked up. "From here on out, we'll be following the plan that the Eight Great Apostles set forward. Your Excellency, I'm afraid you'll need to act soon—or you won't be able to stop them."



The Empire. The mechanical utopia.

The Nebulis Sovereignty. The Paradise of Witches.

The war between them was about to reach scales as of yet unseen and suck the rest of the world into its vortex of destruction in the process.

“Or so the world believes.”

“That *won’t* happen. If the descendants of the Founder have any ounce of wisdom, they will know now is not the time to bare their fangs at us.”

The Imperial Senate. This organization held supreme authority within the Empire. In the chambers echoed the voices of eight men and women—those who united the assembly, the principle members that made up the Eight Great Apostles, the highest positions of power. They did not show their true forms, only hazy outlines of their faces on monitors set up along the walls.

“The Nebulis Sovereignty should be aware that we have captured purebreds.”

“And it’s a big deal that their government has shut down due to the queen’s injury.”

“The absence of their leader and the kidnapping of purebreds must have the people in shambles.”

That meant no all-out war. The Sovereignty was too busy alleviating the fears of their own citizens.

“The Sovereignty won’t retaliate for a while.”

“In that time, we can use our purebred samples to continue our research on astral power.”

Growley. The head of the Zoa.

The Imperial forces had gotten their hands on the best research subject they could hope for. They had guessed that his Vice was a second-generation astral power—potent and rare.

“Remember: When we got our hands on Subject E, we faced great disappointment. The astral power was useless. We could hardly call it one of the Founder’s descendants.”

“But...”

“That was a *great* failure.”

Silence filled the chambers, an unusual scene.

It was as unusual as the irritation vocalized by the Eight Great Apostles.

“Let us hurry with our research.”

“Subject E’s—Elletear’s—compatibility ratio with the star was too high. It’s difficult to predict how she’ll change from here on. It would be ideal if she were to stabilize in the same way as Vichyssoise.”

CHAPTER 2



An Unfamiliar Side of Him—Alice's Lesson

1

Three days had passed since the raid.

Never had so many news outlets from other countries gathered in the Nebulis Sovereignty. An official statement had been issued that the royal family—the targets of this attack—would finally be making an announcement.

So the press had come.

The representative of the royal family stood on the platform in front of them—a burly man in his prime in a luxurious white suit. He looked like a model.

"I am Talisman, serving as the representative on this occasion. I look forward to speaking with you."

"Please tell us about the state of the royal family," called out one reporter.

"We are unified by our stance to protect the country," Talisman answered. "We plan to maintain our composure as we face these barbarous acts."

"Some people in other nations and neutral cities are worried the Sovereignty will strike back, launching them into a full-blown war."

"Rest assured, I can tell you that there will be no retaliation or war," said the head of the Hydra. His confidence seemed to reassure all the reporters. "What we must do is denounce the Imperial forces and call for justice. We wish for the entire world to join our cause."

"Going off that, do you believe the current queen should take responsibility for the raid?"

"I believe it's unfair to blame the wounded queen. We have unified around her, hoping for world peace."

He spoke in as genial a tone as possible, stressing the words *peace* and *justice*.

"...Oh, please." Alice gritted her teeth in the living area of her own room.

The bloody traitor.

He had colluded with the Imperial forces, bringing them to attack the palace. He had even abducted her sister!

“Justice? *United* around the queen? How can you lie through your teeth?!”

She could barely hold in her anger. Had Alice attended the broadcast, the reporters might have witnessed her launching herself at Talisman.

...It's aggravating.

...I know he was the one behind betraying the Sovereignty, and I can't do anything!

Behind his gentlemanly smile, Talisman was a sorcerer.

Alice's only recourse was to rescue Sisbell.

“Ugh.” She held herself up by holding on to the edge of the table, suddenly light-headed and depleted of energy.

For the three days following the raid, Alice had not gotten a wink of sleep—instead she'd been issuing orders in place of the queen and desperately trying to conjure a method to deal with her abducted sister.

“Come on... I need to work for just a little longer.”

A glass bottle lay on the table.

She picked up the stimulants—caffeine pills—and chewed on several tabs. The bitter aftertaste and distinct smell that lingered in her nose were difficult for Alice to stomach.

She needed those pills—just for now.

“...I wonder what Rin is up to. She reported that she met with Iska at the safe house yesterday, but she hasn't said anything since...”

Alice hadn't received any messages since the day before.

The five servants should have been with them. As their employer, Alice was worried, wondering what had happened to Rin.

Bip. The communications device she had left on the sofa went off. An incoming call.

“Rin?! I was worried about you. Are you all right?”

“I'm sorry. All the servants are safe. I was hoping to update you on the status of their health and the news they have relayed to me.”

“I understand we're in a difficult situation, but I did want to hear *something* from you...”

After all, the queen had been targeted. There was no telling whether Rin would be safe.

“.....”

“Lady Alice?”

“...I'm glad. If something had happened to you, I have no idea what I would have done.”

The anxiety inflating in her chest subsided. Somehow, that seemed to dispel her drowsiness.

“And what about *them*?”

She didn’t name the Imperial unit on purpose. They didn’t know who might intercept the communication.

“I have transported them to a hotel in the city. I’m sure keeping them in the safe house would have caused issues of some sort.”

“You’re right. It would be a problem if they stayed there too long.”

The Zoa and Hydra knew nothing about the safe house. All floors were under heavy surveillance, so the Lou could review the footage.

...I don’t think Iska would do anything suspicious.

...If anything, the most difficult part will be reporting my findings to Mother.

She had a duty to report the use of the safe house to her mother. And Alice herself needed to check what had happened in that place with her own eyes.

“Oh right, Rin. About how to use this.”

Alice looked at a portable computer screen. The device was set up to capture the footage from the surveillance cameras at the safe house.

“Mother always reviewed the cameras; this is the first time I’m doing it myself.”

“It’s simple. The red power button starts it up, and the blue square button will allow you to see the footage from the beginning.”

“Oh, it’s started.”

The monitor showed the front entrance of the safe house, a black-haired boy heading into the building followed by the servants. Alice recognized his face.

“Oh, Iska is in frame! Ha-ha, he’s noticed the camera! Now, he’s on his guard.”

“Lady Alice, am I imagining the excitement in your voice...?”

“What excitement?! I—I take watching this footage very seriously, that’s all!” She fast-forwarded through the recording. “Rin, how do I change the angle on the camera?”

“Press the triangular button. It has other rooms recorded as well... Oh...” Rin stopped speaking. She had just realized something. *“Oh, n-no, Lady Alice! You can’t press that button!”*

“What? What’s gotten into you?”

“Th-there’s something...that should never have been recorded! You cannot look at it, Lady Alice—”

“Huh? What are you talking about? The cameras are here—to record the bad things that could happen.”

“Um... Th-that’s not what it is...!”

“If you won’t spit it out, I’ll check it for myself.”

Alice switched cameras, landing on the small room in the back of the safe house. Displayed there was—

“...I was taking a shower...”

Iska, fresh out of the shower. Before he had put on clothes.

His wet, naked form displayed right before her.

His body was different from hers. A boy's body—strong and seemingly vying for her attention. Alice couldn't look away from Iska, someone she had thought she knew, someone who was in the nude in front of her for the first time. At the same time, it was far too much for her innocent side.

“Coo...” She let out a sound that was indecipherable, even to her.

The young maiden turned bright red and fainted.

“Lady Alice?! Lady Alice, please respond! Please keep it together! ... See? That's why I told you not to look!”

2

The central state. A hotel room near the palace.

“Rin, are you sure you don't have somewhere to be?” Iska asked.

“Shouldn't you go out to greet Alice?”

“Lady Alice needs an hour of rest.”

“What?”

“I'm afraid she has passed out. She has never educated herself on a certain subject, as someone from a sheltered background. It seems it was too much for her.”

“...What was too much for her?” Iska was confused by Rin's response.

They had moved from the safe house to a hotel in the capital, supposedly to meet with Alice and devise a plan to save Sisbell. Alice, however, was seemingly out of commission for an hour.

“It sounds like a big deal if Alice is fainting.”

“It's your fault, Iska. Because you're so dirty.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Your thing and other parts... You know what? Let's not get into this. Just thinking about it makes me embarrassed.”

Rin turned away from him. Did Iska see her blushing, or was he just imagining things? He had no clue why.

“So what should we do?” Iska asked. “Everyone's waiting in the other room. Should we bring them back here?”

“Let them wait.”

Rin had arranged three hotel rooms: one for the Imperial unit, one for the servants, and a meeting room. Everyone other than Rin and Iska were on standby in the last room.

“Lady Alice is still coming. I must prepare the tea.”

“Well, supposing she is...”

Iska absentmindedly observed Rin as she continued to work. There were bags under her eyes. Her face was pale. Now and then, she would take a deep breath.

“Rin, you haven’t...”

“Had sleep or rest for three days? Obviously. The queen has gone down, and Lady Alice has been up to her eyeballs with work. It is my duty to support her.”

She was obviously exhausted.

Iska had washed off in the shower at the safe house and gotten rest the night before in the hotel room.

But Rin hadn’t. She had no time to rest since she was supporting Alice and serving as the primary point of contact with the Imperial unit.

...Rin might be the most overworked one here.

...I haven’t seen her take a break or eat since yesterday.

“Maybe I’m overstepping bounds, but what if you took a break until Alice gets here?”

“Hmm?” Rin glared at him. “Rude. Do I look tired to you?”

“You certainly don’t look like you’re doing well.”

“Even if I were, Lady Alice is fighting without any rest. As her attendant, I can’t rest... But I won’t deny that my eyes feel a little heavy...”

Rin staggered forward. If she hadn’t caught herself on the table, she would have pitched to the floor.

“See? You’re even struggling to stand.”

“Ngh...! Th-this is nothing! If I make coffee with sugar, my mind will clear up!”

“Didn’t you drink seven cups yesterday?”

“Ugh, shut up, Imperial swordsman! I don’t take orders from you!”

She produced a high-grade coffee grinder. It was clear she was the attendant to a royal family. She was intending to grind the beans for a proper cup. Rin fed them into the opening.

Or so Iska had thought.

Except she had brought out an apple and banana. Iska watched her in horror as she tried to stuff those into the coffee grinder.

“...Perfect.”

“Perfect?! W-wait, Rin! What’s gotten into you?! Weren’t you making coffee?!”

“Nonsense, Imperial swordsman.” Rin pointed at the fruits sticking out the top of the grinder. “Are you saying this isn’t coffee?”

“That’s an apple and a banana!”

Rin wasn’t her usual self. The lack of sleep and fatigue must have

added her brain.

“Hmm?” She started up the grinder and made some apple juice. After pouring that into a cup, Rin stared at it quizzically. “...This coffee is a different color from usual.”

“That’s because it’s apple juice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. How would I mix up coffee beans and apples?”

“You just did! If you still haven’t noticed, you *must* be half asleep!”

“...That’s...most certainly not the case. *Meow.*”

“And now you sound like an entirely different person!”

“Shh, Imperial swordsman, you’re making my head hurt...” Rin picked up the cup, polishing off the juice in one gulp. “.....”

“So? Have you gone back to your—?”

“Peeeeew.”

“Don’t faint on me! Hey! Rin? Ugh, I knew you were at your limit. How are we supposed to strategize in this state? Alice is going to be here any minute.”

Iska sighed, holding up Rin, whose eyes had rolled around to the back of her head.



Nebulis Sovereignty. Star Spire.

Alice followed an attendant, exiting through a small door at the back of the spire and heading to the courtyard. The area was swarming with news reporters trying to get in and guards standing attention, but none of them seemed to notice her.

“This way. Don’t let go of my hand.”

A tall woman with close-cropped hair in a suit held Alice’s hand. The astral crest on the back of her hand glowed gently.

“I’m sorry, Kisasage,” Alice told the woman. “...For, um, abruptly delaying things for an hour.”

“Do you feel better?”

“Um...y-yes. Thank you...”

For a moment, she worried she might conjure up a memory of a certain boy, so she shook her head as hard as she could to clear away the thought.

...N-not now!

...This isn’t the time to remember what Iska looked like!

She nodded, trying to convince herself. “I need to forget... Oh no. I can’t forget it. He’s seen me naked, too. Th-that’s right. This is an intel war! We hold no secrets from each other!”

“Lady Alice?”

“It’s nothing!” Alice cleared her throat. “Are we going straight to the carport?”

“No. There is a normal car outside of the palace. The Zoa and Hydra might notice if we use one from the palace grounds.”

“Thank you. That was an excellent decision.”

This was why Kisasage was part of the queen’s royal guard. More specifically, she was a member of the Planetary Domiciles, which exclusively served the royal family. To exit the palace under heavy surveillance, Alice had asked the guard to accompany her for a day.

Kisasage’s astral power was a clandestine one; it was better in stealth than the best active camouflage used by the Imperial forces. As long as Alice was touching the guard, she was invisible, both audibly and visually.

They got into the car outside the palace.

“Rin should be there already,” Alice said. “She’s taken the five servants from the villa and evacuated them to the Kamilish Hotel in Central District Seven.”

“We should arrive within an hour. We’ll need to take the long way to prevent anyone from tailing us.”

“I’m counting on you.”

The car jerked forward once Alice was situated inside. They didn’t pass by many cars on the road, because the citizens were refraining from going outside.

“About Lady Sisbell’s rescue—,” called out the guard from the driver’s seat. “I have a question, if you’ll allow it. I understand the Hydra are behind the coup that targeted the queen, and they’re behind the Imperial raid. I know rescuing Lady Sisbell is the key to turning that all on its head, but...”

“Are you asking who will rescue her?”

“Yes. Not only are we unsure of her location, but it will be dangerous to sneak into the Hydra’s base of operations.”

So who would they dispatch to complete this mission?

They needed people who were capable and whom they could trust. The only problem was that they couldn’t be directly associated with the Lou; otherwise, if things went awry, the Lou would be caught in a tough position.

“Kisasage, what would you do?”

“I think I would have the highest chance of success. But I’m the queen’s guard. If I were captured, the Lou would face public scrutiny. My second choice would be to bring in Noman.”

“...I didn’t expect that.”

“It won’t be cheap. You’ll be asking them to pick a fight with one of the royal bloodlines, so it’ll come at the cost of something illegal,

I'm sure."

"No, I meant to say—"

An organization that existed outside international law—Noman, also known as the Witching Hour.

The witching hour was the time between day and night, when one would be met with witches and disaster.

A cliché nickname. Alice kind of doubted they secretly undertook covert operations worldwide, but she had heard of them.

"I've heard it's a den of international criminals," Alice offered.

"Poison has its uses," Kisasage told her. "As long as you're able to pay the price, they're the type who will enter unexplored regions inaccessible to even a research team—all to discover new species of organisms. I guess you could call them an agency that exists outside the law...though we can't publicly ask for their help, based on their reputation."

If they succeeded, they would be able to get Sisbell back. If they failed, they would leave their client's name out of it. Alice was reluctant to rely on them, but they *were* the most suitable people for the job.

"Kisasage, I want you to leave this to me and Rin."

"...Do you know someone who would be better suited than Noman?"

"Someone who's more skilled and earned my trust. My Iska is... Ops..."

"Iska?"

"...Nothing. He's the guard I will be relying on; there's no other meaning behind it."

Now she had done it. Their conversation had been flowing so naturally, she had let his name slip. A bad habit she'd picked up recently. She felt it was getting worse day by day.

...This is not good. I've only ever let his name slip around Rin.

...Now I'm starting to talk about him with other people.

She let out a silent sigh.

Of course, the five servants of the villa knew Iska was from the Imperial forces. She needed to prepare for the eventuality of them reporting this to the queen. When that came out, Sisbell would be in the toughest spot for using Unit 907 as her personal guard.

"Can you trust them, Lady Alice?"

"Yes. I heard they are mercenaries from an independent state. Sisbell hired them there. One of them is particularly skilled."

"Is that this 'Iska' character, Lady Alice?"

"...Yes. I suppose that is the case."

Was Kisasage's hearing sharp or intuition strong? Alice was desperate to act in a way that wouldn't invite further questioning from

the trained guard.

Alice only knew a snippet of Iska's battle history, but it was enough to leave her impressed.

—From their standoff in the Nelka forest.

—And him resealing the Founder.

—Crushing the Zoa's darling, Kissing.

—Apprehending the transcendental sorcerer, Salinger (who later escaped).

—Counterattacking Vichyssoise, who had been after Sisbell.

And the ultimate event that had happened three days ago.

When Alice had abandoned emotion and fought him with all her powers as a witch, she hadn't been able to stop him. Alice did not doubt a thing anymore. His abilities were real, and he wasn't the type to go back on his word to save her sister.

"In any case," Alice said, "I'll make sure to handle this situation."

"As you wish, Lady Alice. I do hope you'll consult me for even the smallest details, seeing that Lady Sisbell's rescue is an urgent matter—for the Lou and for the nation. Oh, we've arrived at the hotel."

Central District Seven.

The top floor would let them see out to the spires in the palace, making it the ideal location to devise a plan to save Sisbell.

"I'll accompany you to the hotel room."

"Thank you. But you should stay by my mother's side. She just had surgery; please stop her if she tries to do anything before she's ready."

After dismissing Kisasage with a tiny nod, Alice walked to the entrance. Part of her disguise was tinted glasses. After crossing through the hotel lobby, she headed to the elevator. Rin had already given her the card key, which was stowed securely in Alice's bag.

The forty-first floor. Alice headed to the room number Rin had relayed to her.

"...You know, the last time I saw Iska was our most recent battle..."

If she were being honest, she had mixed feelings about reuniting with someone after a death match. She would have preferred to meet him elsewhere, but now wasn't time to be choosy.

"Phew... I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Iska and Rin! Let's start strategiz—Huh?"

There were no signs of life inside the suite, despite Alice's energetic opening. In the corner, bags were stacked high—likely belonging to the Imperial unit. Used teacups, abandoned on the table.

"Oh, right. She said she got three rooms."

So this was the meeting room. The other two were for the Imperial unit and the servants. Iska and Rin must have been resting in

their respective rooms.

“I did tell them when I would be coming; I wonder if I should just wait for them here.”

She sank into the sofa, imagining they would be there in no time at all.

Except they never showed.

“...Ugh. I wonder what they’re doing. I can’t believe they would make me wait...! If I keep doing nothing, I’m going to get drowsy...”

She hadn’t slept for more than forty hours.

Her flight-or-fight response had kept her grounded. But now that she was sequestered in a hotel, there were no soldiers to see or ministers to meet. She didn’t have to do anything. All she had to do was wait.

Her mind started to relax, letting go of the stress...

“Ugh! A-Alice! You can’t sleep! Not in a place like this!”

She struggled to get off the sofa, but her butt was glued in place.

Just for a moment... Just for a few minutes until Rin comes. Why don’t you rest your eyes? whispered the devil on her shoulder.

“I—I can’t sleep! ...U-until Rin comes, I’ll...just lie down a little... I don’t think anyone would mind that...”

Yeah. All she was doing was lying down on the sofa.

The sunlight was blinding. That was why she was closing her eyes.

“.....Zzz.”

Seconds passed. Alice reclined, her breathing rhythmic and sweet.



Several minutes later. Outside the silent suite...

“Commander, it’s time for the meeting.”

“Got it! Could you get the room ready ahead of us, Iska? I’ll fetch Nene and Jhin.”

“Be quick.” Iska opened the door of the meeting room.

In his left hand were documents. Rin had hurriedly prepared them for Sisbell’s rescue.

“Alice is late. She did say she needed an extra hour. I hope the Hydra didn’t try to stop her...”

He opened the door and headed to the living area. Iska doubted his eyes when he saw a certain girl with golden hair collapsed on the sofa.

“Alice?!”

The witch princess was limp. Iska was more surprised to see her in this state than when he’d engaged with her in a death match twice.

He couldn’t believe it. What had happened to Alice, the all-

powerful witch?

And...Iska refused to think she'd dozed off, after seeing her viciously attack him three days prior.

"Alice, pull yourself together! What in the world happened...? Who did this to you?!"

Was it an assassin? Had someone snuck into the room?

He looked around just in case, but he didn't sense anyone else. Iska couldn't spot any signs of a struggle.

"...It doesn't look like there's anything wrong with her."

He didn't have a responsibility to take care of her; he was an Imperial swordsman, and she was a witch. In this situation, however, he felt guilty looking down at Alice, not doing anything.

"It looks like she's breathing. I don't see any wounds... Well, I can't just assume she's okay."

She might have been injured somewhere. He had to check her back—someone might have stabbed her and left her there to die.

"...I'm going to move you around, just a little."

He picked up the girl, momentarily disarmed by how thin she was. Her skin under his fingertips was supple and smooth.

For some reason... For whatever reason, holding her made his face hot.

"Not now, nerves! I've carried girls during first-aid training."

"...Mm?" Alice—unconscious still—let out a sensual sigh.

"Alice?"

"...Ngh. Oh, Rin? Did you come to wake me up? Give me five more minutes..."

She sounded so innocent. Even with her eyes closed, she looked so sweet, smiling.

"Alice, are you awake?!"

"....."

"Alice?"

Never in a million years would he think she was sleep-talking. He didn't know what to do.

Alice wrapped her arms around his neck. "Just five more minutes... Okay, Rin? Do you want to take a nap, too?"

"Hey!"

"Oh c'mon! Don't resist. Ha-ha, you never know when to give up."

The witch princess had flung her arms around him and nuzzled her face into his chest.



From her skin was an indescribably sweet scent. The sensation of her silky hair tickled him.

This was not good.

He couldn't express in words what was so bad about it, but his instincts were screaming at him.

"...Wow, Rin. You're so warm. I might get burned."

"What are you saying?! Anyway, Alice, if you're awake, you have to get off me!"

Ka-chak. The door opened behind Iska.

"Whew, I managed to get the documents in time. Lady Alice is about to come. I need to clean the room and prepare the tea."

It was Rin, balancing stacks of paper. Her eyes went wide when she saw Iska holding Alice.

"...Lady Alice?"

Fwoosht. The papers fell from Rin's arms. Her unconscious mistress was being held by an Imperial subject.

The light went out of the attendant's eyes. "Iska, did you...?"

"N-no! Wait a sec, Rin. I didn't do anything to Alice. She was collapsed here!"

"I see." Rin sighed. "You don't have to explain yourself, Imperial swordsman. I understand."

"G-great..."

"In other words, you've taken Lady Alice hostage. And if we want her back, we must pay a price."

"No!"

"Am I wrong?" Rin looked puzzled. At least, Iska thought so until her expression turned dark. "Then...did you catch her by surprise and have your way with her, unable to control your carnal desire? You're sick!"

"You're making it even worse!"

"Give Lady Alice back!"

"I just told you: It's not like that! ...Just go get everyone. We're supposed to start our meeting!"

3

In the middle of the living area, Alice nodded, looking grave, perched on the sofa. She appeared to be a different person—no traces of her adorably sleepy self. Her eyes housed a regal air Iska knew well.

"I'd like to formally ask you to rescue my sister..."

"We've already agreed to it—ever since we took the job as her guards and came to the Sovereignty," Jhin replied. He sat in a chair

beside the table and leaned forward. “But we’re not volunteers. We decided to be a witch’s escort for our own reasons. We won’t back out till you pay us.”

“Because of your commander. Is that right?”

“We told you at the villa,” Jhin continued. “We can’t go home empty-handed after coming this far.”

“...Um, Jhin. I—” Mismis started to say.

“Shut it, boss,” Jhin stopped Commander Mismis.

As Sisbell’s guards, they had been prepared for ups and downs, but Iska had never expected they would be pulled into an actual war in the Sovereignty.

“Commander Mismis, let me take a guess: You weren’t born with the astral crest on your shoulder, right?”

“To thank you for being my guards, I will give you information on how to properly conceal an astral crest.”

With Mismis’s personality, it meant she would feel guilty for pulling her subordinates into this mess because she’d become a witch.

...That’s why Jhin told her to not say anything.

...He was telling her to not feel bad—that we’ve already decided on this.

She didn’t need to feel guilty. This was Jhin’s way of respecting his commander. Nene nodded next to Iska, expressing the same sentiment.

“Plus, it was our fault that Sisbell was taken away—even if it was beyond our wildest expectations. We can’t do our job half-assed...” Jhin shrugged. “But we’re Imperial subjects—which means we have no clue where she could have been taken. So tell us if you have any leads.”

“As far as that’s concerned, I spoke to my moth...to Her Majesty.”

“The queen?” Jhin switched from aloof to actively listening.

Nene and Commander Mismis widened their eyes. Even Iska couldn’t stop himself from holding his breath. This was a big deal.

...The current queen.

...Alice’s mother. Now the queen herself is involved.

She was the sworn enemy—the greatest and most powerful one—of the Imperial army.

That being said...Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX was a princess. It was natural for the queen to act in the interest of her daughter.

“I’ll speak in concrete terms. Rin—and Yumilecia, Ashe, Noel, Sistia, and Nami. Please listen closely. I would like to hear your thoughts.” Alice looked at the family servants. “I do not think Sisbell is in the palace. At the top of my list is the Solar Spire, but I believe

that Lord Talisman would move her to a different location, seeing how he can be so cunning.”

“...Because it’s a public location?”

“Yes. There will be guests from other nations and the press. If someone witnesses my sister, it would be bad for them.”

“Could she be in a nearby hotel or a warehouse? Just like us?”

“_____” Alice shook her head in silence. “Possibilities are low. The buildings in the central state can be searched under the queen’s command. She’s already started sweeping the hotels, warehouses, and normal residences.”

“Just give it to us straight,” Jhin urged.

“What?”

“You’re not trying to find Sisbell. You’re looking for Imperial soldiers still hiding out in the central state after the raid. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“.....”

“This is the perfect time to redefine how we stand as Imperial soldiers.” Jhin looked at Rin and Alice—the two astral mages, normally enemies. “Like I said, we came to your country as Sisbell’s guards. We promised to protect her. You do want us to keep her safe, don’t you?”

“Let me explain,” Rin said in a hushed tone. “You should know you’re in a precarious place as Imperial soldiers. And you’re right: We’re looking for your troops in hiding.”

“I knew it.”

“Many were injured in the raid. And since the Queen’s Palace was under attack, any Imperial soldiers will pay for their crimes with their life. Naturally, that includes you.”

This was why Alice had cried during her fight with Iska. Regardless if the Hydra were planning this or not, the Empire had sent an assassin to harm the queen, and members of the royal family had gone missing. It was no longer an option for the two superpowers to just glare at each other across the globe.

“I cannot forgive a single Imperial soldier. Even ones appointed by Lady Sisbell as guards.”

“In the public eye.”

“In the name of justice. But...I guess you’re right. We can’t just be focused on justice.” Rin sighed, dissatisfied, tone hesitant. “This is an exception. We need to apprehend and execute any and all Imperial soldiers, but we grant you immunity in exchange for Lady Sisbell’s search.”

“Until we get past the border.”

“Of course. Would you be fine with that, Lady Alice?” Rin asked.

“Yes. We’ll keep our promise.” Alice nodded and looked at

Commander Mismis. “And are you fine, Commander?”

“...Yes. That’s what we’d expected. Right, Iska?”

“Of course.” He didn’t turn to the commander, but instead made eye contact with Alice, who had turned toward him. “Talisman got us, too. We want to exact our revenge if we can.”

The Nebulis palace. Great hall.

Gathering here were the most powerful members of the Sovereignty—the current queen, her guards, and cabinet, as well as representatives of the Zoa and Hydra. They sat around a circular table. The cabinet members were behind the queen, including former members of the cabinet. Roughly thirty of them in total. Fifty, including the guards on standby in a corner of the hall.

“Your Majesty, I apologize if this comes off the wrong way, but it must be said that you have made a grave blunder.”

Bouncing off the walls was a man’s voice—sharp and resonant.

All eyes were on the *temporary* representative of the Zoa—a tall man clothed in black and wearing a metal mask to conceal his face.

“You allowed the Imperial forces to invade the palace. We’ve never seen anything like this since the founding of this nation. I don’t think I have to tell you that our brethren paid the price for it.”

“.....” The queen pressed her lips together and remained silent. Bandages were wrapped around her arm, but seeing her in visible pain wasn’t enough to convince Lord Mask to go easy on her.

“We’ve lost all contact with our head of household, Growley, for over seventy-two hours. The Empire hasn’t announced anything, but they must have taken him.”

“.....”

“Those gifted with exceptional astral powers are our national treasures. It is a great tragedy that one of them was abducted—to be used for human experiments.”

The queen was silent. There was nothing to refute. If she couldn’t prove the Hydra were involved, no one would believe the queen ever again.

“Please wait, Lord On!” said one of the secretaries working for the Lou, unable to stand the tension in the air. “Her Majesty is just as upset as anyone. Two of her daughters, Lady Elletear and Lady Sisbell, are missing. It’s pointless to assign blame when we should be trying to

rescue the—”

“It’s simple,” Lord Mask interrupted. “We must launch an attack on Imperial territory. We must reduce their city to ash—just like we did a century ago. That is the best way to save the hostages.”

“...What?!”

“You think a civil conversation will give us Lord Growley back? ... No need to answer. To the Empire, the purebreds aren’t hostages, but guinea pigs.”

The captured purebreds were fated to something worse than death. And these inhumane experiments would never see the public eye. They would keep close tabs on the results, so other countries would not fall out of their favor.

“I’m sure the Empire will feign ignorance, claiming nothing inhumane has been done. So, how do you plan to negotiate with them?”

“We... We can...”

“See? That’s why I want to attack them.” Lord Mask spread his arms toward the queen before posing a question to ministers and military officers behind her. “If anyone has a method of recovering our brethren, by all means, please raise your hand.”

“Lord Mask.”

The queen had spoken.

“As the queen, I cannot approve any proposals that would result in more casualties.”

“I’m sure we could manage without those—if we have a strong leader.”

The room stirred. The people were alarmed. A strong leader? This seemed to imply that the Zoa was *unsatisfied* with the queen.

“Hmm. You have a point.”

Only a single man spoke up, smiling. The leader of the Hydra, Talisman.

“Then we must hold the conclave early and choose a new queen. I’m not opposed to it. It makes perfect sense for us to select a new ruler when the country is in a state of turmoil.”

And if they were to select a new queen now?

The Lou would be in last place, seeing how no one had a favorable opinion of the queen.

The Zoa had been influential, but with Growley’s absence, they had a headwind to work against.

The Hydra had the biggest advantage.

“Isn’t that right?” Talisman asked.

“No, *no*,” Lord Mask corrected him.

“...Hmm?”

“Lord Talisman, you misunderstand. I know I said we need a

strong leader, but I wasn't asking for a conclave." The leader of the Zoa grinned under his cold, hard mask.

"I would like to awaken our Revered Founder."

"What?"

"Excuse me?!"

Talisman and the queen realized they were shouting at him. Several of the ministers jumped to their feet without thinking, and the royal guards standing by the walls exchanged shocked looks.

The Founder Nebulis.

Isolated deep underground in the Sovereignty, she continued to slumber.

"I didn't even think of that. I'm sure the Revered Founder could...!" excitedly murmured a middle-aged minister. Those around him seemed surprised, but none disagreed.

"What do you say? What about you, Minister Brutal?" Lord Mask asked.

"I—I...believe it's worth considering."

"And former minister, Sir Veistro?"

"I'm in agreement. She's a leader and the necessary firepower, as you've said."

A century ago, the Founder had turned the Imperial capital to ash. If they were to awaken the oldest astral mage—

"Please, wait."

The hall stirred when the queen spoke.

"We cannot make this decision now. We do not have a method of awakening the Revered Founder. And doing so would be dangerous. I am sure you remember the damage that befell the neutral city Ain."

Of those in attendance, only the queen had been an eyewitness. The Founder had not shown a shred of mercy to Alice, a distant relative. There was a fundamental dissonance between the Zoa's proposal to lay waste to the Empire *and* save the hostages. The Founder would be willing to sacrifice her brethren to destroy the Empire. She was on another level—as far as her astral powers were concerned.

Most importantly, Alice had said the Founder's hatred of the Empire did not even compare to that of the present-day people.

"If the Revered Founder attacks others outside the Empire, the Sovereignty would be hated by the world."

"A great opportunity to show off your abilities as the queen. Oh, it's time." Lord Mask stood up. "During the next meeting, I'd like you all to present some methods to wake up the Revered Founder. Now, if you'll excuse me."

He bowed before taking the others from the Zoa with him, leaving the hall.

The palace. Midair corridor, Sun Path.

A man and a woman walked down the glass corridor that connected the Queen's Palace to the Solar Spire. Both of them were as tall and beautiful as models.

"Oh my. I'm at a loss." Talisman stopped and looked up at the heavens through the glass ceiling. "I guess I should have expected this from Lord Mask. He's played the best card."

"You mean the thing with the Revered Founder?"

"Yes. I'm interested in hearing your opinion, Mizy."

"...Oh? That's rare, Uncle." She giggled. The mature-looking girl paused, turning behind her to meet his gaze with her beautiful eyes.

Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX. A girl with chiseled features and hair the color of lapis lazuli—a shocking hue. Her hair used to be the same color gold as Talisman, but when her powers activated, it had deepened it blue.

"It makes me nervous when you ask for my opinion, Uncle."

"No need to hold back. Please speak—as the next head of household."

"In that case...it'll mess with our plans if the Revered Founder wakes up."

Talisman's niece—the princess promised to be the next head of the Hydra—was the candidate for the throne, receiving the backing of her family.

"If we hold the conclave now, the Hydra would win. Considering the queen is in an indisposed state and the head of the Zoa is missing, neither of them can focus on the conclave right now. Neither of them would be able to prepare for the election, I'm sure."

The House of Hydra wanted to host the conclave.

The House of Zoa preferred to avoid it while they were missing their head of household.

The House of Lou wanted to postpone it to maintain their current administration.

It was perfect.

If they held the conclave right now, the new queen would be from the House of Hydra. However...

"I'm afraid awakening the Revered Founder would change all of that."

"Hmm. In what way?" Talisman asked.

“The Founder’s shoes are far too great. Even if I won the conclave, the country would cease caring about the queen—if the Revered Founder is back in the game. Obviously, they would obey her.”

The Founder was above the queen. It would mean nothing, even if they did snatch the throne, if she was in the picture.

“And we don’t know what she’ll do when she’s awake. After all, we still do not understand her astral powers.”

“You’re right. All signs point to her having multiple powers.”

Each person only had one astral power—except the Founder, who didn’t follow such conventions.

“What’s the worst-case scenario?” Talisman asked.

“I think there’s a possibility that the Revered Founder may have a power similar to Sisbell’s—something like mind reading or hypnosis, possibly even reviving the past.”

Then, the Hydra’s scheme would be *exposed*.

If the Founder were to reveal they had ushered in the Imperial forces—the enemy she’d once turned to ash—the Hydra would become the target of her wrath. They needed to avoid that scenario.

“An accurate breakdown.” Talisman clapped like this was all a joke. “Oh, Mizy. You figured it out just minutes after the conference. I would have no objections to you becoming queen immediately.”

“You’re too kind.”

“Upon further reflection, that means Lord Mask’s plan was perfectly on point. In fact, he chose the best countermeasure against us. Lord Growley might be missing, but we must be cautious of the Zoa.”

If the Founder awakened, that would give her more authority and power than the queen. She might be the only one who could make the Sovereignty more powerful than ever.

“Elletear may have left from the country *because* she realized what the Zoa had planned. In which case...”

“Uncle?”

“Nothing.” Talisman smiled and shook his head when his niece looked up at him. “In any case, the Founder symbolizes the past. There’s no place for her in the modern era.”

Clack. Talisman started down the glass corridor again, accompanied by the beautiful girl.

“We cannot wake the Founder. Mizy, prepare to be busy—as a candidate vying for the throne and as an astral mage.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“I suppose that leaves Vichyssoise.” He looked out the glass wall.

Talisman murmured, as though to himself. “I do not know if it was caused by her transformation into a witch, but it seems she has become somewhat unstable. I hope she is not roughing up the princess

from the Lou.”

4

A white room. A doorless space. Even the floor and ceiling were the same color.

Sisbell gulped as a door materialized.

“Yo, Sisbell.”

“...Eek?!”

“Oh, don’t be scared. Besides, I’ve been ordered to be nice to you.”
Vichyssoise.

The little witch toyed with her dark red hair, chuckling in a low voice. She wore a stud on her right ear and a hoop on her left. Her feral eyes said she was trouble. This girl was not human.

“...You.”

“Hmm? Oh, well, this *is* the Solar Spire. Can’t really wander around in *that* form.”

The Solar Spire? Sisbell was still within the palace grounds.

“Ah-ha-ha. You look relieved. You feel better ’cause you think you know where you are?”

“.....”

“Whatever. So, Sisbell...” Vichyssoise sidled up toward her.

She pushed like she wouldn’t take no for an answer, which made Sisbell bite her lip and shrink back. Anyone would fear Vichyssoise after seeing her as a monster.

Sisbell felt the wall press against her back. She had been pursued into a corner of the room.

“D-don’t come any closer!”

“Oh, don’t be so mean.” Vichyssoise stretched out an arm, grazing Sisbell’s cheek as she leaned against the wall. Made-up in purple lipstick, her lips came close to Sisbell. “There’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“And you think I’ll talk?”

“It’s nothing serious. Just something I was a little curious about. How’d you get that guy to work for you?”

“...What guy?”

“The former Saint Disciple, Iska.” Vichyssoise drew closer, as though trying to look into her soul. She was close enough Sisbell could feel her breath.

“I know I’m not human, but that swordsman seems inhuman in a different sense. Seems like all the rumors about him having a draw with your sister in the Nelka forest are true.”

“What?” Sisbell couldn’t help but let that slip out.

What did that mean? She hadn't seen *that* in their past.

...My sister fought Iska in the battlefield?

...But she never spoke a word of that to me.

Of course, she'd had her suspicions. When Sisbell had tried to hire Iska as her guard, Alice had been reserved.

"Why would you know this Imperial soldier when you are a Sovereign princess? Didn't you just call him 'Iska'?"

"I heard you call him by his name."

Even using her power, Sisbell had not been able to determine the past that linked the two of them together.

...So that's how it is, huh?

...They met in the Nelka forest?

Illumination could only work within a three-thousand-yard radius. Her astral powers couldn't unlock these memories since the forest was so far from the Nebulis Sovereignty.

"Alice fought against Iska? ...What do you mean?" Sisbell asked.

Have they always been enemies who had fought each other on the battlefield?

That meant they were sworn enemies. They must have attempted to fight to the death. There was no way they could have opened up to each other in the independent state or the villa.

"Oh? You didn't notice from the way they were acting?"

"O-of course not!"

If anything, I'd like to know more, Sisbell wanted to shout. She couldn't say it. If she showed any weakness, the witch was sure to take advantage of it.

"...More importantly, is my attendant Shuvalts safe?"

"Of course," Vichyssoise said and nodded so readily, it was anticlimactic. "I'll guarantee he'll live as long as you obey me. Your astral power is useful, after all."

"...What do you intend on making me do?"

"You'll find out once you wake up."

"Ngh."

The witch reached her hand out, covering her vision.

"Night-night, little princess."

And then, Sisbell lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 3



Path to the Sun

1

Kamilish Hotel. Forty-first floor.

Five in the morning. A time before room service served breakfast.

Iska caught sight of a girl walking down the hall.

“Rin? You’re up early.”

“I woke up an hour ago. I’m used to it...and it seems you are, too. I was thinking of beating you awake if you’d fallen asleep while on watch.”

Iska was standing in front of the room on guard duty.

Rin sounded incredibly surly. “Time to swap.”

“...?”

“I’m saying I’ll trade with you. We have another strategy session at noon. Rest until then.”

“No, I’m fine. I trade with Jhin in two hours anyway.”

“The fate of Lady Sisbell is in your hands,” Rin whispered. She looked down the hall as she spoke in a low voice so that no one would hear in the off chance they were being monitored. “I genuinely feel this way after talking to Lady Alice yesterday. It doesn’t sit right with me, honestly, but just this once, I’ll support you no matter what.”

“Thanks, but we’ve been taking turns resting.”

“Go train or something,” Rin said, because she was a first-rate fighter. “It’s not keeping guard so much as standing in the hallway for two hours. I’ll take over, so devote yourself to making sure you’re in the best shape.”

“.....”

“You can take care of your swords or examine your equipment. At any rate, I’m sure there’s something better for you to do than standing around.”

“...I get it already.” Iska was the first to surrender when she stared him down. “But I don’t get to call the shots. I’ll ask Commander Mismis.”

He turned around to leave when his exchange with Alice the day

before flashed in his mind.

“Oh...”

“What? I’ll stand guard, so hurry off and get to your room.”

“About yesterday. I wanted to ask you something.”

It was about the strategy session with Alice, during which they’d discussed potential locations where Sisbell might be held captive. Iska was concerned about something else: Alice had revealed a secret to only him before her departure.

“I know it’s strange of me to ask, considering our positions...but did the queen really fight against *that Joheim* during the raid three days ago?”

“...What do you mean by ‘that?’” Rin’s voice contained hidden barbs.

“I take it that you’re the queen of Nebulis?”

“I’m Joheim. I’ll have you know that I’m the Saint Disciple of the first seat.”

“The queen said she fought someone by that name,” Rin told him.

“What did he look like? You saw him, right, Rin?”

“Obviously. He was a tall man with a thin, long sword. His hair was red, and he wore armor and a coat. It was different from the usual battle uniform, so it must be a special order.”

“...Then I guess it’s true.”

Joheim the Saint Disciple. In this era when guns and artillery were the primary form of battle, he was the only Saint Disciple who was a swordsman like Iska. Not that Iska had never fought against him.

“Hey, Iska. Answer me this: Are you trying to say that the queen was wrong? Or that the guy was someone other than Joheim?” Rin practically snapped at him.

Iska slowly shook his head. “That’s not what I mean.”

The Saint Disciple of the first seat had attacked the queen. Iska was surprised to hear Joheim had left his master’s side, but no one else could have brought her down.

“It had to be Joheim. I can’t give too many details, considering my position.”

“Then what’s your question?”

“It’s about how Elletear had been struck down.”

“What?!” Rin’s shoulders quivered. “...What are you trying to say? Lady Elletear tried to protect Her Majesty, which resulted in her sustaining considerable damage. Lady Alice and I both saw it.”

“And Joheim took her?”

“Correct. She was taken away by car, but no one knows whether she is alive—”

“That’s what’s suspicious.”

Alice’s older sister—the one who was beautiful in inimitable ways.

Iska had heard something about her, however. Just before Vichyssoise had taken Sisbell, the witch had declared that Elletear was behind everything.

“What concerns me is the fact that no one knows *if* she’s alive.”

“What? What about it? After a grave wound like that—”

“It *has to be* fatal. That’s why it’s so strange. If she was actually taken down by a Saint Disciple, no one would question her condition. Even I would be beyond hope if I was on the receiving end of his sword.”

“What?!”

“If she was taken by Joheim, that means he thought she was still alive. Except all serious attacks dealt by a Saint Disciple are fatal. He had to have missed on purpose.”

“...But it wasn’t fatal. Then you’re trying to say...” Rin knit her eyebrows together.

A dozen seconds of silence passed.

“You think Lady Elletear was *acting*?”

“She was one of the people who might have been behind this whole thing. We basically know she’s connected to the Hydra. Plus, she was expecting us, *and* she threatened Sisbell to get her to the villa.”

“...So you think she was acting out the part of a tragic princess by saving the queen?”

“And didn’t that tug on Alice’s heartstrings?”

Alice had suspected Elletear’s involvement in the scheme...but witnessing this tragedy had forced her to rewrite her version of the truth.

...What if that was part of her calculations?

...What if receiving the blow was her plan?

Alice and the queen had been deceived. Even her own family—her flesh and blood—couldn’t see through the princess’s devilish plot.

“There’s...no way. I refuse to believe Lady Elletear would purposefully do such a thing... You didn’t see all the blood.” Rin bit her lip. “The floor was red. I saw it. No one was acting or anything. It actually was—”

“Vichyssoise the witch.”

“What?”

“The assassin of the Hydra. The monster. She didn’t die even after being cut down by a sword. I know you saw that, too, Rin.”

“After feeling no resistance at the tip of his blade, Iska was the one who stopped.”

"It was like cutting through water—"

There were so many similarities between the witch that Iska couldn't hurt and Elletear, who had been sliced through by a Saint Disciple's sword.

"...Impossible." Rin stood still in shock. The color quickly drained from her lips. "...Are you saying Lady Elletear...is like that monster...?"

"If she is, then she wouldn't die from such an attack. It all adds up, huh? Especially because she's still alive."

Elletear had to know she wouldn't die. In fact, if she were colluding with the Hydra, she might have known about the secret to becoming a witch.

"So basically, the Saint Disciple never would have hauled her off if she could have been dead. He must have known she was alive."

"...B-but..."

"Elletear *let* herself be struck down so she could *leave* the palace. It all makes sense if you think of it that way. She wasn't taken by the Imperial forces: She fled to the Empire voluntarily."

"_____" Alice's attendant didn't offer anything in response.

"Just to be clear, we don't care about Elletear or what she is."

There was a very small possibility that Unit 907 would run into Elletear in the Empire.

"I have no idea what she's thinking. I'm not going to look into whether she was a spy for the Empire, and I can't tell you even if she was one. The only thing we're working together on is saving Sisbell, and that's it."

"...I understand." Rin finally nodded. "All we need is for you to save her. Lady Elletear will be dealt with by the House of Lou."

2

Afternoon. In the suite hosting the strategy session.

"Okay, just to clarify: We can basically act like Imperial forces?" Mismis, seated at the table, faced Rin, who was standing in front of her.

"The Imperial forces are still hiding in the central state. And four of them just so happened to target a facility owned by the Hydra..."

"That's right. And Lady Sisbell just *happened* to be there—or so we'll pretend." Rin exchanged looks with the attendants. "And these two will work with you."

Two of the attendants bowed, looking incredibly tense, despite

having shared meals and lodging with Iska's group over the course of the past few days.

"I am Nami Orcast. It is nice to officially meet you."

"I'm Sistia Quo-Katz. Though this is much too large of a role for me to fill, I will do my best to help you and risk my own life for Lady Sisbell's rescue."

Nami was a black-haired girl of only fifteen years old. Sistia was a sixteen-year-old with brown hair. Neither of them were military personnel, but as servants of the House of Lou, they possessed enough astral power to navigate emergencies.

Nami's Fog would invade the enemy base.

Sistia's Echo would locate Sisbell's position.

Unit 907 and these two servants would make up the team executing the maneuver.

"I summarized their astral powers, but I believe it would be better to hear the details from them. Nami," Rin called.

"My power is Fog. I think it may be faster to show you."

The girl with black hair held up her hand. Her surroundings shimmered like a heat wave, and she melted into the rest of the room.

"You're gone!" Commander Mismis yelled, but Nene had the bigger reaction.

"...Whoa! That's even faster than Imperial camouflage," Nene commented.

The newest technology developed by the Imperial forces used blurring for full camouflage, too. Nene looked in Nami's direction, gaze deeply curious as an engineer, but...

"I'm over here."

"Eek?! S-since when...?" Nene nearly jumped out of her skin when someone touched her shoulder from behind.

The astral mage had appeared right behind her. Nami had silenced her footsteps, but without context, it looked like she'd teleported.

"Could you see her, Iska?"

"...Not at all. I barely sensed her footsteps."

"A waste of a power for a housekeeper." Jhin seemed to have mixed feelings.

She could have been hired as an assassin on the spot. If the mood struck her, this tiny girl possessed the potential to assassinate the best of the Empire. Her short demonstration had given them another glimpse of the threat posed by astral mages.

"That's a very Imperial way of thinking," Rin murmured. "Astral powers are not as all-powerful as the Imperial subjects believe. Nami, please show them."

"Of course."

The girl with black hair jumped, and the once-perfect camouflage vanished before their eyes. A forced dispersion of the spell. Iska had an idea after he'd seen everything from start to finish.

"Is speed the issue?"

"Yes. I cannot use Fog unless I'm basically still. If I try to run or jump, the camouflage would disappear."

She couldn't fight with the astral power invoked, which meant she couldn't go into the battlefield.

...She can only use it to hide.

...I guess she wouldn't be suited for an intelligence unit.

She specialized in protecting Alice, the queen, and others. Her powers made sense as a servant.

"I can conceal multiple people, but more people means less time. Assume I will only be able to help with Lady Sisbell's search for a few hours."

Nami thrust out her arm. She held the back of her hand—the location of the astral crest—toward them.

"As soon as you touch this astral crest, the camouflage will start. But if you leave my side, the effect will wear off, so please be careful."

"I think I've got the gist." Jhin looked at the other servant. "You're next, Sistia. What's your power?"

"Echo can gather sounds and analyze them. It can hear voices and breathing from far away." The brown-haired girl pressed her finger against her lips, signaling for them to quiet. "I can use it in a fifty-yard sphere. In this hotel, that means anything within seven floors. For example, right now, I can hear tourists talking on the thirty-fifth floor."

"Even behind closed doors?"

"Depends on whether the room is closed off. And I suppose the type of sound, too. It's more difficult to detect metallic noises, while it's easier to pick up on human noises and footsteps. Since astral powers dwell within humans, it's sensitive to human sounds and—"

"Sistia."

"...My apologies for going off on an unnecessary lecture about astral power." The servant cleared her throat when Rin glared at her.

"To put everything together," Sistia said, "we will use Nami's Fog to enter the Hydra's base. If we approach Lady Sisbell, we should be able to use my astral power to determine her location. But we don't need to go out of our way to save her."

They just needed to determine her location. Then the queen could start a compulsory search and enter the Hydra's base.

"We will carry out the plan in two days and aim for a time when Talisman is busy in a meeting. Even if they catch onto our plan, the Hydra basically have their hands tied without the head of

household... Any questions?"

"I have one," Jhin immediately said to Rin. He was looking at Nami. "It's about that Fog. Are you invisible to surveillance cameras when your power is activated?"

"Yes. Not even a lens can pick it up."

"What about infrared and heat sensors?"

"They'll pick up body heat. Automatic doors can pose issues."

"So that means smells and footsteps can also tip the enemy off?"

"Yes. But Sistia's Echo might be able to obscure some of those sounds. Collecting sounds means also preventing them from diffusing."

"One final question." Jhin directed this one at Sistia. "About Echo—can you use it to silence guns, too?"

"Unfortunately..."

"I got it. Then we'll stick with the infiltration plan."

They would avoid physical combat as much as possible. Nene's and Mismis's Tasers had a silencing function, but they weren't actually noiseless. Jhin couldn't use his sniper rifle.

"If anything happens, we've got Iska," Jhin said.

"That's the plan."

Iska had also come to the same conclusion.

...My swords would be the quietest to use.

...And it wouldn't be hard to take them by surprise if we got up close to them with Fog.

Of course, using force was their last resort. If they started something in an enemy base, they would be at a fatal disadvantage—in numbers and familiarity with the land.

"And, Rin, aren't there purebreds there, too?"

"It's possible. Especially those left in charge in the absence of the head of household, like Princess Mizerhyby."

"A princess, huh..."

They had basically assumed the Hydra would have another candidate for the throne—just like the Lou. This was the first time, however, their suspicions had been confirmed.

"Rin, can you elaborate?"

"Sure. I'll tell you more about the Hydra and their fighters, but..." Rin scowled before looking earnest to a point Iska doubted his own eyes. She hardly blinked as she stared straight at him. "This plan relies on you."

"_____"

"I don't know how to feel about this, but I trust your skills. Please save Lady Sisbell."

"Um, Miss Rin? I hate to be so forward, but..." Nami seemed puzzled. "Do you know these people?"

“...?! N-no, um... I’ve made a mistake...” Rin’s face turned red. Or so they thought. She kicked up her leg. “Imperial swordsman! Because of you, they have the wrong idea about me!”

“How is this *my* fault?!”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

“Ouch!”

Iska launched himself away before Rin could kick him again.

CHAPTER 4



Snow and Sun

1

10:00 AM.

Placing a hand over her beating heart, Alice walked down the palace halls, Rin right next to her. Her attendant had been with the Imperial unit until late last night, verifying the final plans; she had returned to the castle right before daybreak.

“One more hour,” Alice said.

“We’ve done what we must. Please focus on the conference, Lady Alice.”

“...I know.”

The fate of her family hinged on this plan. If Iska could determine her sister’s location, they could expose the Hydra’s plan and restore the people’s faith in the current administration. A single misstep would mean defeat. If the queen were deposed, Alice would have difficulty winning the conclave.

“_____” Her mouth was zipped closed as she headed to the general hall.

They would continue the conference from the day before. By the time Alice and Rin arrived, the queen, her ministers, and the important members of the Zoa and Hydra were already seated at the table.

“I apologize for my tardiness.”

“You’re right on time. In fact, I believe we were early,” reassured a man’s melodious voice. Among the grim faces, Talisman’s grin made a sickening impression. *“Why, Alice. You were absent from our earlier conference. Are you sure about attending this one?”*

“Yes. I scanned the proceedings.”

“That’s what’s important.” He waited until she took her seat. *“You look nervous, so I thought something might have happened.”*

“Wha—?!” A strangled cry escaped her lips.

...Did he somehow detect what’s going on from my expression?

...He must have realized our plan—or at least picked up on it.

If that were true, he was already expecting Sisbell's rescue.

He didn't have the full picture, however. He had only guessed she would rescue her sister. He had only made his comment as a means of gaining more information based on her reaction.

"Thank you. It's my first time dealing with such a situation, and I'm racking my brains trying to think of how to deal with it."

"I see. Please don't push yourself." Talisman's smile did not falter.

Lord Mask, who sat farther into the room, was whispering to the royal guards surrounding him.

...Same goes for him.

...Lord Mask and Lord Talisman have had a long history with their silver tongues.

She had no means of winning against them intellectually.

The same held true if she were to fight them with words. Alice might try to speak, but they would manage to coax her in a direction favorable to them. She knew that because it had been the same when she had spoken to her older sister.

Silence would be her best friend. It didn't matter whether they shook her up enough for her to show it as long as she said nothing. She couldn't let the plan be revealed in any of her words this time.

"....." Alice bit her bottom lip.

She placed her fists over her thighs and silently clenched them.

2

There is an old tale of the northerly winds and the sun.

To steal the traveler's clothes off his back, the wind blows as hard as it can but fails to accomplish its goal. Meanwhile, the sun slowly roasts him, making him abandon his frock because of the heat.

The lesson is...to force others to serve you, use composed persistence rather than intimidation. The logic had held throughout history, and it had inspired a model that the Hydra had favored for generations. Even their institute had drawn its name from it.

The Hydra's research institute. The leading edge of astral power engineering and research—better known as Snow and Sun.

An operation owned by the Hydra.

The research facility had been created to investigate ways of creating a fourth energy revolution by taking the astral energy from the planet's core to use in place of electricity and gas.

"...At least, to the public. In actuality, it's a place to hide the

Hydra's personal soldiers."

From the lawn, Nami pointed up at the gleaming skyscraper, which was dark gray in color. Guards carrying anti-astral power riot shields stood on either side of the entrance. They didn't look like astral corps from the field so much as the suppression forces Unit 907 had seen at the prison spires.

"As you can see, they've employed several soldiers that are not part of the official royal guards, passing them off as lookouts. I believe hundreds of them are permanently stationed here... What do you think, Sistia? Do you hear anything?"

"They're on high alert. I hear conversations over radio."

The other servant put her hand to her ear. The others were too far to make out anything, but she had used Echo to listen in on the mercenaries' conversations.

"It seems they're speaking in code; based on the frequency of what they're saying and their reactions, however, it seems they haven't noticed anything abnormal and are continuing with their regular defenses. But seeing how they're communicating with each other so often, I think they're being extra cautious."

"Well, I suppose they would be." Iska had been expecting as much. "We were attacked at the villa. They're probably worried we'll retaliate."

"It's eleven. It's time. Shall we proceed as planned?"

"Of course."

Far off in the palace, Talisman was starting his conference.

...Alice is watching over him.

...This is our chance to invade their facility.

Iska and the others had already been rendered invisible by Fog.

Thirty minutes had passed since they had entered the grounds. They would only be able to remain concealed for another three hours.

"Let's go." Nami led the group, heading to the research facility.

They looked straight into the eyes of the two guards flanking the door, observing their surroundings. The guards, however, hadn't seen any of the people walking in front of them.

"They...they really didn't notice us..."

"Hurry up, Commander. The automatic door is going to close!"

"Ah?! Wait, Nene!"

Before the door could snap shut, Mismis slipped through it.

The automatic doors used infrared and body sensor systems. Since their body heat couldn't be masked using Fog, these doors would automatically open for them. That meant they needed to go through the doors with the researchers to avoid suspicion.

"Oh...that was close. I'm glad I practiced at the hotel yesterday..."

"You're the only one who benefited from the practice, boss."

“Really, Jhin?!” Mismis exclaimed.

“Inside voice, boss. The silencing has its limits. We’ve barely snuck into the enemy’s base.”

Jhin pointed at the lobby. Again, two soldiers were holding radio sets beside the pristine front desk. Even more guards patrolled the gangways.

A facility owned by the Hydra—Snow and Sun.

Like Alice had said, there was one place to hide her sister. It had to be somewhere under the direct control of Talisman—to escape the queen’s order to sweep all houses. Alice had said that would be this facility.

“Whoa. It kind of looks like one of the Empire’s research institutes.” Nene looked up at the floor map.

Astral power engineering—a form of astral power research, illegal in the Empire—was openly being pursued in the Sovereignty.

“Um, I assume the walls are thick in case the astral power goes berserk. This pipeline might be used to bring astral energy from an underground vortex up to here...”

“Nene, save the comments for later.”

“B-but, Iska, this facility is better than I expected!”

“...It really is.”

Nene had a point. Iska had been told it was a place to keep soldiers, so he didn’t think it would look like this. It was like they were in an Imperial research facility—scientists walking down the halls, monitoring entry points, and all.

...Maybe that works in our favor.



...If it's a bona fide research facility, there won't be a lot of places to hide Sisbell.

He highly doubted that all the hundreds of researchers had been let in on the scheme, though the mercenaries under Talisman's direct employ might have been. In other words, they could only hide Sisbell in places inaccessible to researchers.

She had to be in a management center where the soldiers were stationed or in an electrical room underground or the garbage disposal facilities. Or...

"I knew it wouldn't be that easy." Jhin peeled his eyes away from the map and looked at one of the servants. "Is the giant room at the top used by Talisman? Seems like the best place to keep her."

"Yes. Miss Rin confirmed that in her research."

"There's *no elevator* that can make it up there."

All public elevators didn't go above the tenth floor. Those with clearance could go up to the fourteenth floor. According to the map, however, there were no entry points for the fifteenth floor.

"...It's fine. We'll leave that one last. Let's head underground." Jhin turned to a special-service elevator in the back of the first floor.

They found an empty car with an open door and slipped in together. When the elevator started moving down, Nene looked up nervously at the ceiling.

"Hey, Jhin. There was a surveillance camera in the hallway earlier. Do you think it saw us? I hope they don't see we pressed the button..."

"They won't notice us. Elevators are automatic. They have no way of knowing intruders are operating it." Jhin's eyes never left the lit panel above their heads. "Hey, Nami. You said Fog lasts for three more hours?"

"Yes. To be more accurate, I cannot guarantee anything beyond three hours. It might last four, but it might run out if we go five minutes over three hours. I don't have any control over that."

"And you said you have a two-hour recovery period?"

"Two hours and seven minutes. After that, I can activate it again."

"Okay."

The large elevator stopped. They were on the first underground level. The thick metal door opened. As soon as they saw the scene waiting before them, Nene and Commander Mismis let out strangled cries.

"Eep?!"

"Th-that's...!"

Soldiers were carrying guns.

Flanked by burly men, a thin old woman donned in bright red was

heading toward them.

Grugell, the Witch of the Midnight Sun. The assassin who had attacked them at the villa. She had disappeared when the villa collapsed, but she must have been rescued by Talisman's cronies. The witch was heading straight for the elevator.

".....Jh-Jhin!" Commander Mismis cried.

"Shh, boss. It's fine. They weren't waiting for us. They were just waiting to get on the elevator."

The six of them attempted to get out as the witch and soldiers boarded the elevator. Their clothes grazed one another. The group turned around to see the elevator carrying the witch close.

"Looks like they're headed to the *fourteenth floor*. If that old lady's going there, something's probably up..." Jhin looked straight forward. The underground area must have been the standby area for the guards. Men holding guns were stationed in the halls. "I see. The floors above ground can be accessed by the public, so they're only using anti-astral power shields as their form of defense. But underground, they don't need to hide that they're armed to kill. This is a hangout for their mercenaries."

"I can hear several voices." Sistia crossed in front of the soldiers and walked ahead, activating Echo. "According to them, there are five conference rooms total. Two large inner conference rooms."

"You got all that just from listening?"

"Yes. And below us—I think the floor below—I hear someone breathing. It seems like someone entirely different from the soldiers."

All of them gasped.

"M-maybe that's Sisbell?!" Mismis said.

"...Let's go."

Iska nodded, and they started to walk with hurried steps.



Snow and Sun. Fourteenth floor.

Grugell left the elevator and walked down a deserted hallway. She'd instructed her soldiers to wait behind for her.

"Oh, Granny Grugell. Could you hold up a moment?"

"Hmm?" The woman—thin and old—twitched when she heard the voice behind her. "...Vichyssoise, is that you?"

"Sure is. I'm glad you've made a full recovery. How's that bump on your head? I heard some Imperial soldier named Jhin punched you and gave you a mean bruise."

Grugell had no idea when Vichyssoise had appeared.

The girl with red hair and prominent piercings peeled herself off

the wall, seeming rather reluctant, and headed straight toward the old woman.

She stared at Grugell. “Hmm.”

“What?” Grugell barked. “Alas, I don’t like young waifs. Come back to me in forty years.”

“Ha-ha,” the witch snickered. “It’s actually you. I thought you were a fake.”

“...What do you mean?”

“You smell.” Vichyssoise placed a finger on the tip of her nose, looking positively jubilant. “Ever since I became a witch, I’ve become sensitive to the smell of astral power. You had some odd energy around you, so I had my doubts.”

“This is an astral power research center. Why wouldn’t—?”

“I smelled the *same* astral power at the *villa*. Where’d you go today? Did you run into anybody suspicious?”

“Oh?” The woman’s wrinkled eyes crinkled. “I’ve been in the facility all day. I just came up above ground.”

“Yeah? Then they might’ve already gotten in.”

“Even with the surveillance cameras in place?”

“That’s where astral power comes in. They were chosen by the Lou to be servants, after all. They’ve gotta have something useful. Plus...” Vichyssoise crossed her arms. As though she were scheming, she stared into the air, immobile. “Granny, you said you were just underground, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“That’s where we’ve got *a certain someone* tucked away, right? Y’know, Sisbell’s—”

“Hmm!” The woman’s eyes opened wide. Her eyes, once closed, widened. “So they’re here on a rescue mission.”

“No time to react. Gonna report this first.” Vichyssoise stopped the woman. “Could you tell Lord Talisman? Also the next in line. She’s the heir after all, and her power might come in handy.”

Vichyssoise held up her pointer finger, jabbing it in the direction of the top floor, and snickered.

“Well, she’s such a show-off. I’m sure she’d sniff this out even without anyone telling her.”

3

Snow and Sun. Second underground floor.

Iska’s group had stepped into an accumulation center—or rather, a garbage collection area that went by that name. A gigantic shredder chewed through paper, cardboard boxes were piled high, and broken

laboratory equipment glass had been left in containers. It really was a garbage center.

This sort of place shouldn't require guards, but several were carrying guns and patrolling the place. An abnormal number of security cameras dotted the ceiling.

"Sistia, about the person you sensed earlier..."

"This way. We're almost there."

The brown-haired servant slipped by a guard. She turned to Commander Mismis, who walked next to her, and signaled with her eyes.

"Behind that heap of trash. In the back near the cardboard boxes."

"...Would they put Miss Sisbell here?"

"It may not be Lady Sisbell. I just feel something coming from there." The servant looked grim as she walked forward.

The cardboard boxes had been stacked precariously high. Commander Mismis peeked behind them. Iska held his breath as he came behind her.

They found an elderly man by himself, restrained with handcuffs.

He had been bound to a folding chair. He didn't even stir. His eyes were closed as if he were asleep. They recognized his face.

...It's him.

...Sisbell's attendant, Shuvalts. So he was here all along!

He had disappeared without a trace on his way to the palace. They had suspected that assassins sent by the Hydra had attacked him. It was a stroke of luck they'd discovered him. They must have been keeping him as a hostage.

"Nene, take a picture."

"Roger. I already got a dozen. We've got more than enough evidence." Nene tucked away her small camera.

Next to her, Nami clenched her hand into a fist, looking excited. "Sistia, you're amazing. If her attendant is prisoner here, then Lady Sisbell must also—"

"Yes. But..." Sistia muttered. "I can't sense anyone that could be Lady Sisbell. I'm not sure she's underground."

"Then she must be on the top floor. That's the one that's suspicious," Jhin answered and looked up at a surveillance camera. "I'm glad the old guy's safe. Nene, could you do something about those two cameras? Ten seconds is enough."

"...I can't. I can block it from filming, but it'll report to the surveillance center that it's been tampered with. And they'd figure out that we broke in."

"Then we've gotta put it off. If we save the old man, the soldiers

will start a manhunt for us. We wouldn't be able to save Sisbell."

Saving Sisbell was the priority. If they had extra time, they could also save her attendant. In other words, if they didn't have time, they'd leave her attendant behind.

"Right, boss?"

"...Yes. I know it's cruel, but we're not in a situation where we can save them both. We need to save Lady Sisbell."

The commander called the shots. Mismis urged the servants onward, pointing at the elevator. "Let's go up."

"...Understood."

The two servants seemed remorseful, but they spun around quickly, trying to shake off their guilt. They slipped past the guards into the elevator.

The fifteenth floor was their next destination.

Except the elevator only went to the fourteenth floor. They still didn't know how to get to the top.

"The old lady went to the fourteenth floor, so we should probably start our search there."

Mismis touched the panel for the appropriate floor. In the high-speed elevator, Sistia placed her hands over her ears and closed her eyes to focus.

"Miss Sistia, can you hear anything?" Mismis asked her.

"I think the guards are talking. But I don't hear anyone saying Sisbell's name. And it's difficult to collect sounds while the elevator is headed up."

Eight, nine, ten, eleven.

No time for any other floors. They were racing against the time limit for Fog. They didn't have the luxury of searching every floor, so they had to be selective.

The fourteenth and fifteenth floors. Grugell—the Witch of the Midnight Sun—had gone to the fourteenth floor. They believed Talisman's room would be on the top.

"We can hide for two more hours..., " Iska said to himself. "And we still don't know how to get to Talisman's floor. We don't know if it's a special elevator or emergency stairs or something else..."

"We need to divide and conquer. Even though we've only got six people," Jhin continued. "Once we get to the fourteenth floor, we'll split into two groups of three. Then we'll comb through the area on our own to find a way to the fifteenth floor. Hopefully, we can find that old lady while we're at it."

The elevator stopped. The thick doors opened to a floor that looked just like the lobby. The sterile and spacious hall sported nothing but monotone walls and ceilings. Sunlight poured in from a gigantic glass window, giving the space a serene glow.

“Iska, isn’t it a little too quiet here?” Nene looked around the hallway and knit her eyebrows together.

There weren’t *any* soldiers around—unlike the underground space around the attendant that was swarming with them. That felt eerie.

“No one else is on this floor. And—” Sistia’s murmurs echoed. “There is *one person* on the floor above us.”

“One?! Uh...wh-what does that mean?”

“Someone different from the older woman. They don’t seem to be moving, so they’re either captive or sitting in a chair.”

“...Then it really might be Miss Sisbell.” Commander Mismis looked up at the ceiling.

Based on the circumstances, the probability was high. But would Talisman really be stupid enough to leave her unmanned?

“What do you think, Jhin?”

“It’s not strange if they were confident we’d never get to Sisbell. They might’ve covered the floor using a special astral power or used it to keep her locked up.”

Jhin walked forward, taking the lead. He headed to the end of the deserted hallway.

“First, we’ll figure out a way to get to the top floor. We can figure out whether it’s Sisbell or someone else later.” Jhin stopped when he turned to the right at a four-way intersection and clucked his tongue in irritation. “...At least, that’s what I thought. Now this is annoying.”

“What? What’s wrong, Jhin?”

“Look.”

They were silent as they looked in the direction he’d indicated. A hidden passageway. It was similar to the one at the villa. The wall was open, revealing a cavity. They caught a glimpse of a spiral staircase inside.

...Someone went up and left it open. No way.

...Is it a trap? But why would they lead us to the top floor?

They couldn’t immediately think of a reason for it. Iska stepped toward the staircase, attempting to break through the curtain of silence.

“I’m going up.”

“Iska?! A-are you sure...?”

“I’ll be careful. You all come after me.”

He headed up the stairs and got to the top floor in thirty seconds. He slipped through the open door.

“.....”

Iska found a spacious hallway in front of him. There were three rooms in the back. The two to either side of him seemed to be conference rooms. The center one sported an ostentatious door with a mechanical device.

“Iska, what do you see?”

“Nothing dangerous yet. I want to get your take. What do you think, Nene?”

“Hmm? What have we got here?” Nene bounded up the stairs and stood next to Iska before narrowing her eyes. She stared at the center door. “Um, that looks like an optical device...so it requires three layers of authentication. Vein biometric recognition, a passcode, and an IC card. It won’t open unless you’ve got all three.”

“This is his room. It has to be it.” Jhin looked at the servant standing behind them. “You said you only felt one person’s presence on this floor. I guess it’s obvious, but where’d you sense them?”

“.....” The girl pointed ahead...to the door with the three layers of locks. “They’re in this room. If Lady Sisbell is inside, then there might not be guards because security is so tight...”

“Maybe. Well, if we just need to get inside, we could break the door. Except that’ll call attention to us.” Jhin glared at the surveillance camera on the ceiling and shrugged. “Even if they can’t see *us*, the camera will see the door breaking. Then they’d seal off the building’s exits, and we’d have a whole load of trouble getting out. If we’re going with this plan, I’d like to know for sure it’s Sisbell on the other side.”

“...Based on the breathing patterns, it sounds like a young girl,” the servant said, looking cautious. “I can discern between whether it’s a man or a woman that way. And the rate at which a person breathes can differ based on age. Everyone’s different, but I believe this is a young woman.”

Like Sisbell.

“Um... What if we postponed this by an hour?” Commander Mismis offered. “We can hide for another hour and a half, and we just need thirty minutes to save Miss Sisbell and get her out, right? So I think we could push this back. I was thinking...we could cast a net here in that time.”

They would wait for someone to open the door.

Then they would follow the person through, which meant they could get in without breaking the door. They wouldn’t be seen on camera.

“Wh-what do you think, Jhin?”

“Now that’s a surprise coming from you, boss. Who taught you strategy?”

“No one!”

“It’s not bad. Whoever would come to this floor would probably have an IC card and would know the passcode. And we can steal them.”

Nami and Sistia didn’t object.

They decided to lie in wait on the top floor. And if anyone came—

At this moment, Snow and Sun rocked from its foundation—following a huge explosion.

It came from outside the window. With a flash of light, the detonation echoed from the ground level, piercing their eardrums.

“Wh-what?! An explosion...?”

“From outside?!”

It was enough to shake the windows. The grounds outside filled with dense black smoke and sparks carried off by the billowing wind.

Was it a bombardment? The flames were too powerful for them to confirm.

“Hey, you didn’t tell us about this.” Jhin ran to the window. “Who did that and what were they after?”

“I—I don’t know! This deviates from our plans!” shouted one of the attendants.

“What is that?” Iska caught a glimpse of something in the blast.

It hadn’t been light from the flames. It seemed to twinkle and melt away in the air in the blink of an eye.

“It’s astral energy!”

Did that mean the explosion had been caused by astral power?

So, an astral mage had attacked this base. It seemed that way from the state of things, at least.

...But wait. It’s not that simple.

...If someone were to do this to the base owned by the Hydra, they’d become an enemy of the royal family.

Even Alice hadn’t been able to do anything recklessly. That was why she had swallowed her pride and asked an Imperial unit to go through with this plan. In which case, how did that explain the explosion below him? Who in the world was it? Who would be bold enough to dare do something so destructive, knowing it would make them an enemy of the Founder’s bloodline?

“...Who is it?”

The warning alarm began to blare. Not a single person could piece together the whole picture. The situation unfurling in Snow and Sun had been unforeseen by Iska—and Talisman.

No one had expected this.

This event diverged from their carefully laid plans. At its source was a grudge harbored by a single man.

“Cheers and applause to mark my arrival.”

The great grounds of Snow and Sun.

The iron fencing had been crushed, unrecognizable now. It was being trampled underfoot by a handsome man with white hair who hopped over it and triumphantly made his entrance.

He had a bold look—wearing nothing but a thick long coat over his otherwise naked chest.

“I was hoping...the head of household would be here. Seems he’s at the palace. Whatever.”

Commanding eyebrows. A sculpted face. The man headed straight into the Hydra’s den, lit majestically by a stage of sparks—tens of thousands of them.

Salinger, the transcendental sorcerer.

He glanced at the soldiers running toward him.

The man who had once bared his teeth at Nebulis Queen VII declared as flames raged behind him, “Kneel. I’ll only let you live if you bow your head to me.”

CHAPTER 5



Cheers and Applause to Mark an Arrival

1

What is the most tolerant of beasts on this planet?

And what is the most ferocious?

The answer to both questions is a dragon.

Only inhabiting the outer reaches of the planet, these beasts are so mighty, they are seldom bothered. A dragon would continue to slumber even if a human researcher poked it or blasted a rocket in its face.

Unless, of course, it hit its chin shield.

Of all its scales, that was its Achilles' heel. A single weak spot. Touching it would cause the dragon to fly into a rage and destroy its surroundings indiscriminately.

It was like Salinger—and his value system that owed no alliance to the Empire or the Sovereignty. It didn't matter to him whether the Empire invaded Nebulis or the Hydra schemed in secret—nothing mattered except learning the secrets of astral power.

...At least, in theory.

That was, until the Hydra had touched upon the one forbidden scale.

"Pathetic. I'm not even in the mood to make excuses."

"I vowed to fulfill my duties as queen... When did I become so weak?"

They had hurt *Mira*. In body and in spirit.

"...You did the same thing thirty years ago. And I forgave you then."

He had been charged with attacking the queen—a crime for which he was innocent. He had been subjected to unspeakable interrogations. Even then, he hadn't planned to retaliate against the Hydra.

Revenge meant being bound to past emotions. It ran contrary to

his philosophy to look only to the future...

“Salinger.”

“I thought of you as my archrival—my only one. I enjoyed being with you, even as adversaries. I wanted to spend more time with you.”

Except there was one thing no one could ever touch, just like a chin shield. Mira was Salinger’s scale.

“You’ve crossed the line, Hydra. Not with the queen, but with me. Know that.”

This declaration of revenge was the one thing that ran in opposition to all his values.

“Who told you that you could lay a hand on Mira?!”



The Nebulis palace. General hall.

The conference of the Founder’s descendants progressed in silence.

“Something went off in the Hydra’s facility?!” Alice shouted, voice ringing through the hall.

“Lady Alice, please lower your voice,” Rin scolded, which made Alice come back to her senses.

“B-but...!”

They had just learned Snow and Sun was ablaze. That was the exact facility the Imperial unit had snuck into.

...Is it from a battle with Iska’s unit?

...Does that mean they were discovered, even under disguise?!

Alice was trying to remain calm, but her heartbeat was quickening from fear. Mercifully, Alice wasn’t the only one struggling here. Dozens of ministers and guards behind her had the same expression.

“What an alarming state of affairs.”

There was one tranquil voice. The head of the Hydra was speaking. Even after the discovery that the base containing Sisbell was ablaze, his gaze remained unchanged.

“It has only been a few days since the Imperial attack. It’s no surprise if their soldiers are still hiding in the vicinity. You, there.” Talisman turned to a royal guard who was holding his breath. The guard was a young man who had come in running with this report. “I believe the culprits to be Imperial soldiers. Please have the military police immediately—”

“I-it can’t be!” cried the guard.

“What?”

“It’s the transcendental sorcerer, Salinger—the criminal who escaped from prison in the thirteenth state!”

“...What did you say?”

This statement cracked Talisman’s mask. His smile fractured.

“And you are sure of this? There was no mistake?”

“Y-yes, sir. The military police are sorting through the footage! But we’ve already confirmed his face on the surveillance cameras using the data gathered during his imprisonment...”

“And they’re positive it’s him?”

“Yes.”

“.....” Talisman crossed his arms.

Alice watched the whole scene from across the table before sharing a look with her attendant.

“Rin?”

“I—I have no idea! The last I saw of him was in the thirteenth state. No one has seen him since. Perhaps Her Majesty is—Your Majesty?” Rin addressed the queen, who sat next to Alice. “...Your Majesty?”

She received no reply. Rin’s voice didn’t reach her. She looked into the distance. It seemed her mind was elsewhere.

“...Salinger. What in the world are you...?” whispered the queen.

“Let us continue the conference.” Talisman clapped once, the sound echoing through the hall. “If they know who the culprit is, they must have control over the situation. Your words of support are appreciated, but that’s all we need. Our defenses will hold up somehow.”

“How *uncharacteristic* of you,” replied Lord Mask of the Zoa. The man—silent until now—coolly lifted the corner of his mouth. Next to him was Kissing, a black-haired girl wearing a blindfold. “Why has that infamous sorcerer chosen now to reap destruction on us? That would normally make you suspicious, Lord Talisman.”

“.....”

“It was Snow and Sun, the astral power engineering research institute that was attacked, right? Why was it targeted? Perhaps you have an idea you can share with us?”

“Any ordinary person like me would have trouble imagining how to commit treason.” Talisman shrugged. “I have no idea why he would do such a thing, but we can settle this by catching him and investigating his motives.”

“Oh?” Curiosity worked its way into Lord Mask’s voice. “So you’re saying you’ll capture the sorcerer then?”

“Our defense is perfect. Since we have no idea when Imperial soldiers might appear, after all.”

“...Tch.” Alice gritted her teeth while they continued their conversation.

That was because Talisman wasn’t just using the term generally to refer to the forces that had attacked the palace. He was using it to refer to Unit 907, the soldiers who had gone to save her sister.

...Perfect defense, huh? So, they were planning on ambushing Iska’s unit.

...They expected Snow and Sun to be under attack.

But what did this new development mean? She could hardly think the timing was a mere coincidence.

Why had a felon-at-large resurfaced at this exact moment? And why had he targeted Snow and Sun?

2

The Hydra’s research facility. The leading astral power engineering and research institute.

It once had an expansive lawn that stretched out like the ocean, dewy and alive. Now, the grounds were red and black from the flames. Its iron fence was warped out of shape. Around the fence were guards who had been knocked down by Salinger’s Blast—his astral power.

“You chose the wrong man to mess with, Hydra.” The jacket draped on his shoulders billowed in the wind. The model-esque man with a head full of white hair marched straight through the scattered sparks.

“Creating a simple diversion would be such a bore. After all, you’ve all invited chaos into the Sovereignty. How about I bring those secrets to light?”

A dozen soldiers leaped out from Snow and Sun’s first-floor entrance, hauling giant guns and specialized riot shields to fight against astral mages.

“Oh, you misunderstand,” he scoffed at the gathering soldiers. “You’re just average soldiers, destined to stay on the sidelines. Did you think you were leads on this stage? You should have just sat in the back row and applauded.”

They pointed the muzzles of their guns at him. He looked at them with ennui and sighed.

“Yes, that’s right.” Salinger snapped his fingers. “There was Talisman’s protégé. Someone who knows of the *Gregorian Descant*. Come out. Name yourself. I will give you permission to join me onstage just this once.”

Silence.

Not a single one of the mercenaries who'd leveled their guns at him said a word in reply. Not just because they didn't understand what he was talking about—they wouldn't have been able to even begin to conceptualize it.

"Ha-ha. See? The head of house doesn't trust you at all," the sorcerer jeered. "Enough. I grow weary of seeing your faces. Disappear. Go on now—"

"The planet is filled with rage."

Violet flames.

The ash-covered lawn broke apart—a fissure in the earth that erupted with a wall of flames. It created a dome around Salinger, a barrier of sorts.

"Is this...astral flame?" Salinger's eyes glittered.

The flames hadn't come from activating an astral power. No, this was a surge of astral energy that had condensed into a material form, hot like fire. Once it started to blaze, neither water nor cold wind could extinguish it.

A century ago, these flames had reduced the Imperial capital to ash.

"A prison of astral flames. You think this will keep me contained?"

"No, this is your grave."

From beyond the wall of violet flames emerged a human silhouette, speaking in a girl's voice.

"You will be burned at the stake. We use flames to purify those who commit most heinous crimes."

This wasn't a person.

Calcified metals gleaming ruby had hardened around her head, appearing hair-like. The thing that looked like a girl wore no clothing; her body was transparent like glass.

"Salinger, the transcendental sorcerer, I presume? Oh my, you're much younger than I'd imagined. And just my type, you handsome devil. I almost regret the fact that I need to burn you to a crisp."

"....."

"Oh, cat got your tongue? Do I look that bewitching?"

"So you're the *experimental subject*," Salinger murmured.

"Huh!" Her eyes opened wide. "What in the world do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid with me." The man glanced around the dome of astral flames around him. "The tri-stage, the integration of humans with the astral powers. Humans who achieve this stage become more powerful than astral mages and reach an entirely new plane. But only two have reached that state using their own power in the history of the world. The *Founder Nebulis* and *Lord Yummelngen*."

“.....”

“And soon, I will be the third. But the Hydra have been experimenting for decades to artificially achieve the state. You were a subject in those experiments, weren’t you?”

Humans turned into astral mages if they hosted astral power. But...if the astral power went from possessing the human body to fusing with it, what would happen?

“I saw it happen thirty years ago, after all. One of the prototypes before you. The true culprit behind the attack on Nebulis VII.”

“Oh. So you knew all of that, huh,” replied the inhuman girl. “I suppose you know about me, too, then?”

“I don’t. And I don’t care to.”

“It’s Vichyssoise. As you can see, I’ve given up my humanity, but I hate being referred to as a subject. If you’d be so kind as to use my name.”

“It’s a little too late for that,” he answered, looking around the violet dome as he spoke. “You want me to remember your name? You’re bold, waif.”

“But I know about the Gregorian Descant, too. Should you really be talking to me like that?”

“It’s on the top floor, isn’t it?” Salinger looked at the wall of flames and chuckled in a low voice. “As soon as I spoke about the descant, you scrambled to set up a barrier before I could get inside. Even if it meant exposing these astral flames to me.”

“.....”

“Amateur. You think you could have deceived my eyes?”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Vichyssoise the witch snickered. The astral flames that blazed from her body roared and rolled. “You know too much. I like your face, so I thought I’d toy with you. But I suppose I’ll have to reduce you to ash now.”

“Don’t you think you’re getting ahead of yourself, subject?”

“I’ll teach you something, old sorcerer. Your time has passed. Even if you poke your nose through the curtains now, your act is over. There’s no stage for you.” The witch sneered.

“It seems you don’t understand.” The transcendental sorcerer kept his composure. “I do not need to rise to the stage. The stage is wherever *I* appear. I told you from the start. Cheers and applause mark my arrival.”

Snow and Sun. Fifteenth floor.

Talisman’s personal room was in front of their eyes. Unit 907 and

the two servants watched the scene below them, dumbstruck. The sparks and ash flying in the air meant visibility was low, but they could see the gun-toting soldiers rushing outside.

“H-hey, Jhin! If the guards are going outside, that means we haven’t been found out, right...?”

“Looks like it. I dunno if it’s just coincidence, but looks like someone was a lot more rash than us.” Jhin put a hand on the windowpane. He looked down, not even blinking. “I’m guessing this explosion has something to do with us, considering everything. You really haven’t got a clue what it was?”

“A-as I said, no!” Nami shook her head dramatically, which sent her hair fluttering. “It’s not as though Miss Rin would resort to such forceful measures. If we were forcing our way into the building, you never would have needed my astral power...”

“Then who is it?”

“I-if I knew that, I wouldn’t be so concerned!”

“Wait, Nami. Quiet,” Sistia stopped her. She was closing her eyes, focusing. She was the only one able to faintly hear the sound on the ground level using Echo.

“...Salinger.”

Iska doubted his own ears when she revealed the culprit’s identity.

There was only one person he knew who went by that name. It was the very name of the vilest sorcerer from the prison spires in the thirteenth state.

...No, but he’s supposed to be—

...I thought he was imprisoned again right before his great escape.

What’s going on?

Why was his name coming up here?

“Salinger? Jhin, who was that again? I don’t really remember,” Nene said.

“No clue,” Jhin replied. “If he hasn’t left an impression, he’s probably not anybody special.”

“That’s not true at all!” Nami wailed. “Salinger is a terribly villainous felon in our country! He invaded the palace thirty years ago and attacked the seventh queen! He’s a fiend! Sistia, you must have misheard what they were saying...”

“The guards were yelling his name on the ground.” Sistia slowly opened her eyes. “I bet they’re more shaken up than we are. Commander Mismis, I think the opportunity is now.”

“So we’re changing plans?!”

“Yes. The enemy is panicking, which means this is our moment.”

Talisman’s personal room. Protected by three layers of security measures, the door that Sistia pointed to made Mismis clamp down her mouth into a scowl.

“The guards are all outside, which means the inside of the building is short on security. And even if we do something now, they won’t notice, right?” Mismis asked.

“Yes. Even if they did, they would believe it was the sorcerer who did it. Our best plan of action is to quickly save Lady Sisbell and leave this place.”

“...I got it. Iska, do you think you can do it?”

“I’ll break it down.”

There was a flash. He had used his black sword to cut a hole large enough for one person to enter. The surveillance camera on the ceiling had been blown to bits using Jhin’s handgun.

“Nene.”

“Leave it to me!” Nene leaped into the hole in the door and unlocked it from the inside. She pushed open the thick door.

Talisman’s personal room...

As soon as Iska stepped into it, the smell of ink assaulted his nose. The space was large enough to act as a conference room. The walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

...A research room?

...No, I guess this is his study.

There were books on astral power research, old languages, astronomy, and even philosophy. Hundreds had been sorted on each bookcase. The dozens of bookcases gave it a library vibe.

“Lady Sisbell!” Nami’s voice rasped as she looked around the room. “Lady Sisbell, we have come to save—”

In the back of the room.

Creak...

A beam of sun illuminated a chair that had been turned away from them. It swiveled.

Talisman’s luxurious chair turned halfway around, revealing the profile of the person sitting in it.

“Someone’s in a rush. Had you requested an appointment, I would have prepared some tea.”

What a charming voice.

And it had come from a girl with hair the color of lapis lazuli, a hue more brilliant than the blue sky.

“Oh. I cannot see the people who have seemed to magically open the door. So you must be using Fog or one of its subspecies. If you’re able to slip past the cameras, it must be a rare one.”

Her face looked mature, and her features were chiseled.

She recrossed her legs, showing off her pale thighs. Even that action seemed perfectly calibrated to be its most beautiful and fluid

form. Her beauty was on the same level as Alice and Sisbell, both of whom Iska knew well.

“...It’s Princess Mizerhyby,” Sistia breathed out, whispering from behind Iska, “It was *her* breathing I was hearing, not Lady Sisbell’s. I am so sorry for my blunder.”

“Her?”

From the Hydra.

Since the planning phases of this mission to invade Snow and Sun, Rin had been on guard for this purebred.

Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX.

The next in line for the head of the Hydra. Rarely did she leave Talisman’s side. As for her power...

“Princess Mizerhyby’s power is called Glory.”

“It’s quite special. There are few astral powers that are similar to hers, but I’ve heard...”

He remembered what Rin had told him.

“How unpleasant.”

...At that moment, a brilliant flash went off, burning itself into their retinas. The glimmer, bright as the sun, had been released from the astral crest on Mizerhyby’s forehead—astral energy shot out of it, materializing.

...What is this?!

...It’s way too strong, even for astral energy!

It was so brilliant, it made their vision white, so it was almost impossible to open their eyes.

“I suppose that I didn’t express myself clearly enough. I mean to say you should show yourselves. I was so generous to wait for you. Well, if you are ignoring my kindness, then I suppose there’s only one thing that must be done.”

Snap, went her supple fingers.

“Instant execution.”

They heard the sound of a motor whirring. Gun muzzles emerged from the bookcases surrounding Iska’s unit from all directions, peeking out from the gaps between the tomes.

“...What?!”

All of them realized something at the same time. This wasn’t Talisman’s study.

It was an execution room.

“These are ray guns that condense and discharge astral energy. Twenty-four in all. They are an experimental device invented in this facility, but I can assure they’re powerful. They use my astral energy, after all.”

The purebred pointed her finger—right at the center of the room—exactly where Iska’s unit was positioned.

“Au revoir,” called out the purebred coolly.

“Get down!” Iska shouted over the princess.

The ray guns blasted. Iska’s black sword sliced through the rays heading toward them.

One of the rays grazed his shoulder. Blood dribbled from the area, splattering on the ground.

“Oh, one of you has come out.”

When she saw Iska, the corners of her lips curled up. Fog hadn’t been able to contain him when Iska rushed forward to slice through the rays a moment earlier.

“Just you? Or maybe your invisible comrades have been hit, knocked out on the floor? Fog can be so hard to use.”

“Leave me behind!” Iska yelled at the five people who were still hidden. “You get to the ground floor ahead of me!”

“Iska?!”

“I’ll figure out where you are on my own. Hurry!”

Iska could no longer see them, likely because he was no longer under the effect of Fog. But he did sense some presences hurry out of the room.

...So Sisbell wasn’t on the top floor.

...Only her attendant was in this building. Has she been moved to another location?

The results of this gambit were painful to bear. They still had no idea where Sisbell was, *and* they had been found out.

“You won’t escape from me.”

On top of the desk, the light on the landline was flicking on and off. Had she notified all the guards? Mizerhyby must have just pressed it.

“My dear burglar, I believe you should give up on your friends—” The princess of the Hydra stood up, full of grace. “Let us make a deal. I will allow you and only you to live if you join my side.”

“...What did you say?”

“Isn’t *this* what the sorcerer seeks?” The beautiful girl flicked the sun-shaped earring with her nail. “I’m interested to know how a man who has been in prison for decades would know of our secrets. Pretend to escape from this building and get it out of him, will you? And ask him how he knows of the Gregorian Descant.”

“What?”

Something felt off.

What was this princess talking about?

...We just came to get Sisbell.

...What’s this Gregorian Descant? What does it have to do with

Salinger?

Something wasn't adding up. Iska had assumed she knew he was part of an Imperial unit. But Mizerhyby had an entirely different perspective. With Salinger attacking Snow and Sun, she had thought that they were working for the sorcerer. They had read each other's intentions incorrectly.

Iska had no idea what Mizerhyby was proposing.

"...What are you talking about?" Iska murmured to himself.

Mizerhyby clucked her tongue lightly. "Tsk."

The clever princess had immediately picked up on the situation based on Iska's reaction. The intruder in front of her was not one of Salinger's assassins.

"It seems I've misinterpreted the situation. So you're one of the Lou's mercenaries. Then the sorcerer outside is a complete coincidence, huh?" She held her right hand in front of her and thrust her willowy finger toward Iska. "A change of plans, then. I suppose I'll have you disappear here and now."

Lights burned in the twenty-four muzzles. Iska sliced through the rays of condensed astral energy using his black sword.

"Did you just cut through the light?! How absurd...!" She held her breath. "I know. Perhaps you might be the former Saint Disciple Iska? Vichyssoise was uncharacteristically reluctant to report about you. You did quite a number on her."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"And impertinent as well, I see... Well, I forgive you regardless." Mizerhyby's eyes gleamed.

In that moment, the princess released astral light from her body, making Iska back away reflexively. He had never seen anything like it before. It seemed crushing, like it would force anything bathed in its light to yield.

"Huh! Is this Glory...?!"

"So you lived after fighting *that* Aliceliese. I'm looking forward to this. I would like to hear the cries of someone as mighty as you."

She wore a sadistic smile. Her tapering eyes narrowed like crescents, and she extended her arms.

"I am Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX; now, I shall show you the most glorious power in this world."

Snow and Sun.

They scrambled down the hidden staircase from the top floor, almost tumbling over themselves.

“...The situation has gone from bad to worse,” spat out Nami, who was at the front of the group. “I’m not sure if they anticipated Salinger’s attack. Either way, it seems Lady Sisbell is not here. I am afraid they must have moved her to another location. And to make matters worse, *she* was waiting for us on the top floor...!”

“Don’t forget: They’ve also seen us,” Jhin said from behind her.

The camouflaging ability of Fog did not work when they moved faster than four miles per hour. And since they were running as fast as they could down the stairs, they were past the speed limitations.

“Even if this staircase will take us all the way to the first floor, they’ll see us when we go through the hall there. You think we can force our way through the crowd of guards?”

“I...”

“Shh. Nami, quiet.” Sistia had on a grave expression as she looked over her head.

The floor above them. The wall had blasted away with the deafening sounds of an explosion. Black smoke billowed in. “The royal guards! They aren’t normal soldiers! They’re Mizerhyby’s guards!”

“Of course they’d know about this hidden passageway. What do you want to do? Should we get to the first floor or fight them... Hmm? ...” Jhin squinted. “What’s that light...?”

He was looking at three goggled royal guards—or rather the strangely brilliant astral light that flickered behind them.

It was like it was dawn. The astral light, which burned their eyes, seemed to be clinging to the guards’ backs.

“Hey, Nami, Sistia. Is that some sort of astral power?”

“...That’s...”

“That’s?” Jhin asked back.

“*Dangerous*. Please head down as quickly as you can. And don’t you dare stop!” Nami shouted. “That’s the crest of Glory. It’s Mizerhyby’s power! Those royal guards have been bequeathed it!”

“...What did you say?”

“Like Miss Rin said. Don’t ever attempt to fight Mizerhyby or the guards that accompany her... It will never amount to a fair fight if you battle them directly!” she yelled.

The two attendants each grabbed Nene’s and Mismis’s hands and ran.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, you did tell us about that.”

He swung his sniper rifle, which he had been holding in his hands, around to his back.

Several days ago, Rin had told them about Mizerhyby’s power.

“We do not have much information...”

“But Princess Mizerhyby’s Glory emits her own astral energy and

strengthens others', supposedly."

Just as plants grew under the sun, Mizerhyby could temporarily boost others' astral power to their highest potential using her light.

"According to rumors...on one battlefield, she created ten soldiers as strong as the Founder's descendants all on her own."

"What?!"

"So she's called the walking vortex. She's one of the next queen candidates and, though it pains me to admit it, her power is seriously strong."

Zing. Something had burst, accompanied by light.

"Crap! Get down!" Jhin had barely managed to yell when a bolt of lightning—a beam of light—blew away the hidden staircase below their feet.



The Nebulis palace. The queen's room in the Stardust Skyscraper.

This space had been passed down between queens for generations, starting with the Sovereignty's Founder.

"Any progress, Alice?"

"...No, Mother. We still haven't received any word from the unit that went to release Sisbell. If anything happens, Rin will send me a report."

They were seated at a four-person table.

Alice was looking over documents alone with the queen. Rin had prepared them to explain the plan to save Sisbell. These were copies. Unit 907 had been given the masters.

"Rin never disappoints. She has every detail down from the blueprint of Snow and Sun to the equipment carried by the Hydra's personal soldiers. She left out the unnecessary information and only selected what we need."

"Rin said she borrows from your wisdom, Mother."

"She just asked for my advice. There are many things I do not know. For example...Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra. I do not know much about her astral power. The Hydra do not make much information public."

Twitch. Alice's eyebrow reflexively arched.

...That's right. Rin said the same thing.

...That Mizerhyby might be the one guarding Sisbell.

But to presume too much was dangerous.

Even if her sister was in Snow and Sun, there were too many possibilities and people who could be standing guard over her. She

had told Unit 907 that as well.

"I'm worried about one more thing," Alice said. "About the report during the meeting earlier."

"About Salinger, yes?"

"...Yes."

The transcendental sorcerer was an atrocious felon who had attacked the previous queen.

When Alice had found out he had an extensive history with her mother—and an ill-fated one at that—she hadn't been able to hide her surprise.

"I don't know why the sorcerer would have attacked an establishment owned by the Hydra. I doubt it has anything to do with Sisbell... Do you have an idea why, Mother?"

"Unfortunately, I do not. What is that man thinking...?" In the seat next to Alice, the queen weakly shook her head. "Since our separation thirty years ago, I have not understood a single thing that has gone through his mind. We're no longer close, after all."

A short silence. A slightly self-derisive smile formed on the queen's face.

"I was unable to stop the Imperial attack, unable to stop them taking my own daughters, and now I could not even dispel the ministers' fears. I'm a failure as a queen."

"Oh. Mother, that's—"

"I am not wallowing. I have a daughter I am proud of."

"....."

"Whoever is chosen to become the new queen will determine the Sovereignty's future. I have a feeling that will be true."

The Zoa and the Hydra were also after the throne.

If the Zoa were selected, they would launch an all-out war on the Empire. Alice did not know what the Hydra intended, but if they were willing to usher the Imperial forces into their country and go after the queen's life, they had to have been planning some great upheaval.

"As a mother, I pray that you do not lose, Alice. If you fail at the conclave, the Sovereignty will be doomed to fall."

"Mother, I'm also worried about the future. But..." Alice gently placed her hand over her mother's on the table. "You must continue to work hard, Mother. Because I still have some unfinished business as a princess."

"Such as?"

"First, Sisbell's rescue. It would be laughable if a queen could not save her own sister."

Alice had been forced to realize that she never wanted to go through the same thing again. She never wanted to feel the shock of seeing the queen and her older sister get taken down by the Saint

Disciple in the Queen's Space—nor the blinding anger that had caused her to declare war on Iska. She's had enough of rage and grief, emotions that had made her lose sight of all reason.

"This is my choice. Though it may not be what you hoped for."

This was the path that Aliceliese would walk down. It wouldn't lead her straight toward queenhood, but it would allow her to protect her little sister and her mother as a princess.

Even if...that wasn't the fastest route to becoming queen.

...And you've misread the situation direly, Talisman.

...You still haven't realized something.

The Sovereignty still didn't know the true strength of the swordsman named Iska—the person Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX had recognized as her one and only rival.

CHAPTER 6



Maiden of Dawn Ablaze

1

Snow and Sun. Uppermost floor.

Something felt weird.

Thinking back on it, Iska had this strange feeling festering in his chest since they had this chance meeting.

...This princess.

...She's full of openings. She's just standing there.

Mizerhyby. The purebred.

With the giant window behind her, she spread her arms as astral energy released from her body, bright like daybreak.

But that was it. He couldn't detect any sign of that energy turning into an astral attack.

"Now I will show you the most glorious power in the world." Her lapis lazuli hair seemed to catch wind.

It was coming. What Iska saw as he prepared himself wasn't an astral attack.

A soldier had *dropped down*. A soldier wearing a mask like a royal guard had leaped down from the ceiling of the fifteenth story.

...From above?

...No way. I thought this was the top floor!

There had been a hidden level. He had really believed this was the topmost floor. Even Sistia had been convinced of that; she had failed to notice the additional person despite Echo.

"I will make you part of a glorious legion." Mizerhyby touched the armed soldier's back.

Iska heard something set ablaze. A mark like the one on Mizerhyby's forehead lit up the soldier like a halo.

"Let there be light—Glory."

His vision went red.

The astral power of fire lit in the royal guard's hand and flared, aiming for Iska and the books indiscriminately.

Bookshelves turned right to ash. The windowpanes broke from the blast, shattering into pieces and falling far below to the ground.

"Hmm. Seems like you're kinda powerful. I powered you up by about three levels." Princess Mizerhyby smirked.

She slowly looked over the dividers that separated parts of the room. Those had been blasted to pieces, the floor and ceiling of the fifteenth floor charred.

"But you have no control. And without that, it's a double-edged sword, now that I've strengthened your astral power."

"I apologize, Your Highness," said the masked soldier in a voice that was surprisingly young, delicate, and feminine. She was staring at her own palm. "...Is this really my astral power?"

"It's pleasant, isn't it? Yes. Your astral power has been blessed to be a level close to that of the Founder's descendants." Mizerhyby pushed away the bangs covering her forehead, revealing the astral crest like she were showing it off.

"Now, rise, former Saint Disciple. How long will you pretend to be fallen?" The witch had a luminescence as brilliant as dawn, and her lips formed a smile exuding joy and dripping with contempt. She pointed at the piled rubble. "Vichyssoise told me that if I face you, I mustn't assume I have won. She said I must treat you like you're alive even if you've fallen, even if you've stopped breathing, even if I tear you up into five or six pieces."

"...Now that's mortifying."

The pile collapsed audibly. Iska pushed away the rubble pressing on his shoulders and stood from the charred floor.

"What?! But there were so many flames—"

"Shush," the princess scolded her subordinate. "Huh. You really are alive. I asked just to see if I could trick you. It was worth asking, it seems. I'm pleased. Could you possibly be immortal?"

"Of course not. And I didn't pretend to just fall down, either."

He almost started coughing, but he stopped himself by force. He'd inhaled soot and smoke, which made his throat smart violently. His hair was plastered to his forehead, probably glued down by the blood oozing from there.

...Did Mizerhyby's power create that explosion?

...Oh, wait. The flames came from the soldier next to Mizerhyby.

Iska hadn't been prepared. Though Rin had told him about Glory, Iska was drawing a blank. The information had been zapped from his brain from this short interaction, and he needed to start defining this power from scratch.

There was a possibility that the purebred's power was far more

dangerous than anything in Rin's explanations.

...She strengthens the powers of her followers?

...Oh, please! It isn't something so weak.

He had never seen flames of that magnitude.

Even the mages from the astral corps could barely manage to light an Imperial military vehicle ablaze. They didn't have the power to level an entire floor easily several hundred square yards in size.

"Are you trying to investigate my power? It seems you have enough knowledge of astral power, former Saint Disciple. But the more knowledge you have, the more your speculation grows and the further off course you go."

The astral crest on Mizerhyby's forehead was a deep purple. Its shape was warped, radiating out from a single point. Nowhere in Imperial datastores had anything similar been listed.

"How about you disappear while you think it over?" This was Mizerhyby's decree.

Another person arrived from the hole in the ceiling. Another royal guard covered in flameproof clothing. The astral crest of Glory burned bright on their back.

"...There were others?!"

And she had already powered up this person. The two royal guards spread out their arms, and a loud noise rang out in Iska's ears as dozens of lights appeared on the floor.

"Are these mines?!"

They were directed ballistics.

Flames scattered in all directions *except* directly behind him. The power was designed to annihilate everything other than the mage controlling the fire.

Another explosion.

The blast peeled back the floor, flipping it over right from under Iska's feet. The ceiling was ravaged by the flames, melting before his eyes. He could barely breathe through the heat wave and the dense cloud of soot and smoke.

"Hmm. Maybe that was overdoing it. Preparing a legion of two to receive one mercenary might have been a bit much," Mizerhyby said.

Though the royal guards flanking her sides were average fire astral mages, their skills had been boosted to the highest levels when they were showered in Glory. This was why Mizerhyby was called the walking vortex. Those loved by Princess Mizerhyby could be given power that set them on the level of the Founder's descendants and become part of her Legion of Dawn.

"The two of you can go down. If the Lou's attendant is taken, then our victor—"

"You really think that?"

A white blade cut through the smoke.

Iska leaped, holding his breath. The fiery winds would have scorched his lungs had he inhaled. In one bound, he slipped past the two guards and headed right up to Mizerhyby.

“...You survived that?!”

He had needed five minutes.

Just like he didn't know much about Mizerhyby's power, Mizerhyby didn't know about the white astral sword. It invoked the hellfire that Iska had sliced through, creating a wall from the resulting air current. He had intercepted the blast from the mines.

“You think you stopped me?”

“...Both of you!”

Before Iska could close the distance between them, Princess Mizerhyby launched herself off the ground in a hurry.

That single step had made the difference.

Iska's sword, impeded by her subordinates, just barely cut through the empty air.

“Aw, so close,” she taunted.

“This is what I wanted.”

“Huh?” Mizerhyby's mocking smile disappeared.

The sword had caught on something, even though she had thought she had made it out safe. Something yellow and cut in the shape of the sun...

“My earring?!”

“You called this *the Gregorian Descant*, right?”

He had no idea what that meant, but he knew the earring held an important secret.

Iska's hunch turned into belief when he saw Mizerhyby's indignation.

...I was right.

...There's something going on with this earring!

That was why the princess had kept it on her person at all times. This was how she had prepared for Salinger's raid.

“Curse you!”

“Let's strike a deal,” Iska suggested.

Before the royal guards could lift their hands, he threw himself into the black smoke and disappeared.

“The Hydra should know exactly what we're after. Don't forget that.”

Iska ran like he never had before.

His destination? The first floor. All to escape the building.

Snow and Sun. The astral power engineering and research institute.

In general, the flames generated by the astral power died out after a few minutes. Even if the flames raged and painted the lawn red, it would never result in a massive fire.

However...when astral energy crystallized to make an astral flame, it was different. Minutes could pass, but until the astral power disappeared, the flames would never go out.

It was an invincible flame.

“Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. You fool!”

A dome of violet flames.

Bewitching, inhuman laughter bounced off the barrier made of inextinguishable astral flames.

“That won’t even tickle me. I’ve already told you that!”

A whirlwind like a tornado had formed around them. The figure of a girl leaped out from the wind that could blast an Imperial tank into bits.

Vichyssoise the witch.

Even when the blades of wind lacerated her thighs and neck, not a drop of blood flowed from her body, which was semi-transparent like glass.

“There! Burn!” She chuckled a ball of violet flames.

If one were to touch them, the flames would rage until the person was reduced to nothing. The most terrifying fireball in the world. And it was coming toward Salinger.

“Comical.”

She was going up against the transcendental sorcerer.

“You’re content with the flames like that?”

The handsome man didn’t move a step, simply dug the balls of his feet against the ground.

Grrrrah! The ground groaned, heaving up and down, as an earth golem emerged from it. Salinger used it as a shield to stand between the astral flames.

“Don’t soil me with those flames. They’re dirty.”

The burning golem was on the move, taking the astral flames and swinging its gigantic fist at the witch. However...

“Get out of the way.” Vichyssoise flung her arm, bringing the golem down. The melting point of soil was almost two thousand degrees. The clods of earth forming the golem couldn’t hold up to the astral flames and melted into lava.

“Aren’t these flames wonderful?” Vichyssoise held out the palm of

her hand. The flames burning there were as beautiful as a budding violet flower. “Astral mages cannot produce these flames. Even the royal family who are the descendants of the Founder, even the most powerful astral mages, cannot create them.”

“.....”

“It’s fate. A mere mage can’t win against a witch who has fused with astral power. It’s only logical.”

The violet petals fluttered.

The astral flames decomposed midair and turned into hundreds of lights that poured down on him. Making contact with even one of them would mean bursting into flames. And if he caught on fire, Salinger would have no way to extinguish it.

“So you’re a one-trick pony.” Salinger had invoked an ice shield around him.

The twelve blue pieces of armor took on the violet lights. The energy collided into it, canceling each other out.

...*Sizzle*. The ice melted. In the next moment, there was a clear sound as all twelve shields melted and disappeared at once.

“Tsk.” Salinger went on the move.

More accurately, he had been forced to move. He used his powerful legs to leap up and out of the way to the side. The light passed his cheek by a mere fraction of an inch.

“Don’t you understand how different we are?” Vichyssoise asked. She watched the retreating sorcerer, her eyes narrowing into crescents. She spoke like she was toying with him. “Word of your Water Mirror has long since spread. You’ve stolen over a hundred astral powers; you’re feared by the royal family. But you can only steal half the actual power. Which basically means you have a collection of odds and ends.”

“.....”

“Well, then I’ll—”

“That’s enough. No need to talk. I fear your stupidity is contagious, and I might catch it.” He grew bored—or at least, that’s what his attitude implied. The man with white hair huffed. “So you’re not even close to having good judgment and etiquette. Most of all, you lack elegance. I thought that if the head of household was around, this would amount to something, but here I am met with a mere wench.”

They were barely twenty yards apart, far enough that their words weren’t guaranteed to reach each other. Salinger told the inhuman girl, “Thirty years ago, I faced a monster who was exactly the same as you. I just came here to confirm that. You think there’s a difference in power? Have you shown me anything yet?”

“Oh, you can be so amusing.”

Astral light burned in the witch’s hand. It wasn’t violet. *This* was

her actual power.

"I was still holding back. It would be boring if I burned you with astral flame and that was it. I'll crush you with one of my Magic Shots."

"Trifling." Salinger cracked his neck.

As though he were looking at a fallen pebble on the ground, he appeared incredibly disillusioned.

"This stage is—"

A crash echoed through Snow and Sun.

A wall blew open. Window glass shattered. The earsplitting sound even reached the astral flame dome that surrounded them.

"Is that coming from the top floor?" Salinger scowled.

"Mizerhyby, what do you think you're doing at a time like this?!" The witch bit her lip and stared up at the epicenter of this explosion. "...Is it the Imperial unit? No way. Not at a time like this—"

"O Terra Burst."

Astral light appeared from the sorcerer's palm. Vichyssoise had made a bad move when she got distracted by Snow and Sun.

"Awaken. Pierce the heavens with your wrath," Salinger stated.

The earth overturned. Not just the surface layer. The planet churned deep below its crust. With enough force to send cars flying like ping-pong balls, the earth swelled and flung the witch out of the astral flames.

"Guh?!"

The barrier was broken, and Vichyssoise shot through the air into the third-floor wall of Snow and Sun.

She didn't look injured.

Since she was outside her barrier, however, the dome quickly weakened, and its flames extinguished.

"You see now? I can take out those flames in more ways than I can count."

"...You! You think I would let you leave?!"

"How unsightly. It seems all you do is bark." Salinger didn't pay any mind to the witch who was attempting to pry herself from the building wall. He stepped toward the front doors.

There were no guards. They had been flung aside by Terra Burst. Not a single one of them was standing on their feet.

"Well, now that's odd. I'm sure the Gregorian Descant is on the top floor. Likely in his room."

But the earlier explosion had come from within the top floor. The walls had caved in. Debris continued to rain down on him.

The sorcerer's voice lowered slightly. "Who is that? Who are the

other intruders who came ahead of me?”

Snow and Sun. Fifteenth floor.

He made his way out of the dense black smoke and headed for the hidden staircase. There, Iska saw the never-ending spiral stairway—and its central pole warped out of shape and burned.

Just minutes ago, he had used those steps to go up.

“No way... What happened?”

He leaped down the partially destroyed stairs. Each time he went down a step, the metal creaked, and the stairway seemed to wobble. It would collapse any minute now.

...This isn't the flame produced by the royal guard in the room. It's other astral power.

...In which case, Commander Mismis and the others must be in danger!

Were they safe? Had they been able to escape or—

Crunch. Under Iska's feet was a white carpet of snow.

Snow? In a skyscraper?

“This is astral power, too!” He quickly dove off the snow.

As if they were following him, snow soldiers leaped out from the pile of snow, carrying ice lances sharp enough to be mistaken for metal, which they thrust at Iska's back.

“Snow golems,” he said.

They'd skewer him through. Before they could, Iska turned back and sliced through their weapons using his astral sword.

“Oh? So we did have an Imperial soldier who escaped us. It's you.”

Below, there was an elderly woman in bright red clothes standing with open arms as if she were welcoming Iska as he came flying down the stairs.

“Former Saint Disciple. Iska, is it?”

“...The Witch of the Midnight Sun?!”

She was one of Talisman's royal guards. A big shot who had made it onto the Imperial headquarters' witch list. He had heard the elderly woman had attacked the villa owned by the Lou from Jhin.

...Just my luck! Running into her here?!

...It's no joke. I don't have the time to fight in the middle of the enemy's base.

He was fighting to get out, not to kill. Now that he had determined Sisbell wasn't there, his mission was only to escape the building.

“Boy, do you want to know what has happened to your friends?”

“Not interested.”

Iska ran down the stairs. That was what she'd been waiting for. The snow crashed toward him. It attached itself to the stair poles like a living organism.

Krish. The handrail and pole were crushed before his eyes.

“Are you trying to flatten me?!”

“That’s the easiest method to deal with you.”

The stairs collapsed. With a deafening sound, they broke apart, turning to rubble, and fell tens of yards below, rushing down like a waterfall.

“...Damn it!”

His footing had been destroyed. He thrust his sword into the wall and barely stopped himself from plunging down.

“Are you planning on clinging to the wall? Well, I expected that.”

He heard the sound of something large slithering. When Iska looked up, the snow on the wall had turned into a giant snake that was slowly rearing its head. The Witch of the Midnight Sun stood on its head, looking down at him.

“You’re out of moves. I would like to watch you like this for longer, but I have a grudge to settle with your friends. I need to hurry and stop them.”

The snow snake opened its maw. From deep in its cavernous split mouth appeared a lance as big as a log.

“Pierce him.”

“...Gah!”

The weapon shot at him like a bombshell. He had no way of avoiding it from where he clung to the wall. His sword was still stuck. So, Iska kicked away from the wall, still holding his lodged sword.

When the spear hit the wall, Iska was already gone.

Because he'd leaped into the air.

There was no handrail or floor waiting for him. Just air. He plummeted dozens of yards.

“You jumped? So you choose suicide?!”

“Yeah, right.”

He let gravity pull him. Then, Iska's fall stopped abruptly. Sharp metal screeched.

A light—the one footing he had been able to use. The light was connected to the wall.

“Ngh?! Soldiers!”

The gigantic snow snake broke apart midair.

It turned into dozens of human-shaped soldiers that flung their lances at Iska. However...Iska had made a decision long before those could reach him.

“Hah!” He breathed out as he cut through the metal wall. A hole revealed a hidden door—an exit that led from the staircase back to the floor.

“There’s a light here, so I knew there had to be a door around, too.”

“Ah... Curse you, Saint Disciple!”

“I’ll fight you on the battlefield.”

He headed into Snow and Sun from the hidden door and ended up on the eighth floor. The layouts of the second to fourteenth floors were basically the same. They were there to do astral power research and were mostly divided into research and experimentation rooms.

...Seven floors until the ground level.

...This is where it gets dangerous. How am I going to get to the first floor?

Though he’d shaken off the Witch of the Midnight Sun, nothing about his situation had changed.

“An intruder is currently prowling the eighth floor.”

“All researchers should take shelter. Guards will immediately come to apprehend him.”

“Damn it, it’s the surveillance cameras!”

He clucked his tongue at the emergency announcement and broke into a run. He had to choose one of two methods to get down: the elevator or the general use stairs.

The elevator? That would be absurd. As soon as the doors opened, there would be soldiers with guns waiting to fill him with lead.

“...Guess it’s the stairs again.”

He headed to the center stairs. Unlike the narrow spiral staircase, this space was made large enough for dozens of people to walk down them at once. Except not a single soul was there.

...No one’s here? That’s ridiculous.

...There were dozens of guards below.

The researchers were hiding. But what about the guards? There was no way they wouldn’t have lookouts there.

He headed from the eighth floor to the seventh, then from the seventh floor to the sixth.

He hadn’t run into a single guard even after he’d landed on the fifth floor. Why?

If the story about Salinger attacking were true, maybe they were focusing their troops on him?

No.

“...She would want to get this back.”

In Iska’s pocket was the earring the princess had called the

Gregorian Descant. She wouldn't hold anything back to retrieve it. So, maybe he hadn't run into soldiers because they still hadn't gotten here yet.

Or they had already surrounded him.

"...But can't get close or they'll get *caught up* in whatever this is!"

He made a decision. He abandoned going down the stairs. Iska decided to go back to the hallways of the building and prepared himself to run into soldiers as he left the stairs—

Right behind him rumbled a violent sound like thunder.

Clap, clap. He heard humble applause from the intersection of this open hallway.

"Two more seconds."

He heard the sound of shoes right after. Past where the hall intersected, he heard a girl's elegant voice.

"Just two more seconds. If you had stopped at the stairs, I could have killed you."

"....."

"I underestimated you. I followed Vichyssoise's advice; I didn't let my guard down in the slightest. But I misunderstood her warning. It wasn't enough not to be careless."

A light like a star twinkled, approaching him. It was a purebred, a perfect representative of the Hydra bloodline.

"Ngh, you..."

"Oh, you mean this? This is what happens when I get upset."

Mizerhyby. The maiden of dawn.

Iska had lost the ability to speak when he saw the transformation that had overcome the beautiful girl. Her long lapis lazuli hair was swept in all directions from the astral energy that she emanated. Tendrils of her hair writhed like serpents. She looked almost exactly like Medusa, the legendary monster.

"Would you be so kind as to return the earring you stole?"

"Is this your attempt at negotiating?"

"No."

She had once worn the simpering smile of a maiden, a smile as calm and collected as Talisman's. That had disappeared.

"Since you've messed everything up, I'll just steal it from you by force!"

Her footsteps sounded explosive. Iska's clothes billowed from the wind pressure as Mizerhyby approached.

"O Glory, the sun goddess's path—astral power, lead me."

"So *that's* your astral power?!"

There was an explosiveness to her that no ordinary person would

have. Mizerhyby's astral power, which had been shrouded in mystery, finally became clear to Iska.

...It's not an astral power that gives astral energy!

...The true power lets her control the people she's strengthened!

In exchange for power, she made them obey her. In order to strengthen the astral mages, they had to have been brainwashed slightly. And now, Mizerhyby was likely yielding to her own power for this battle. In return, she had gained immense physical strength.

However...

"Now...", Mizerhyby began.

"You're too slow."

She halted in her tracks.

As she tried to lower her arm, Iska stopped her from the side by smacking his pommel against her right elbow.

"Guuh?!"

"Don't underestimate a Saint Disciple."

"...You grate my nerves. Had I touched you with a single finger, you would have been unconscious!" Mizerhyby held her swollen elbow and leaped back.

Iska pursued her.

"Shriek! Scream," Mizerhyby commanded.

A sound, like a gong ringing in his eardrums, was amplified as Iska stepped forward. It wasn't the wind.

"Ugh... *Sound*, huh...?"

The vertigo and nausea from being shaken made him spit up blood. A sonic wave shook his ears. People hit with maximum Sound would lose their sense of balance, making it impossible to keep upright. They could even lose consciousness. The Imperial forces also had a sonic-wave weapon, which had been inspired by this astral attack.

And Mizerhyby had strengthened it with her power.

"Think of this as an honor, Imperial soldier."

The princess's smile was gruesome. She had broken into a cold sweat from her swollen elbow and the pain that came with it. Her eyes opened wide enough to send shivers down his spine.

"I've built my troops. I cannot believe stopping one soldier has led me to these lengths— Now, howl!"

At the very back of the hall, a royal guard leaped out, strengthened by Glory, before howling.

Crack. The astral power of Shriek broke the windows one after another.

The main issue was that it was sound. And since sounds were diffused into the walls and ceilings, Iska couldn't cut it with his sword.

"...Now you've done it!" He'd lost his sense of balance to the point

he couldn't even run. Almost on all fours, he leaped off the floor and headed into a room ahead of him.

This was an astral power research center. Since the experimentation rooms had to be airtight, if he could just close the door, that would block off the sounds.

...This is the only way to escape it.

...But that's basically the same as me being stuck in this room.

Mizerhyby's legion was on the other side of the door. As soon as he opened the door, they would flood in like an avalanche. Iska was preparing for that as, from his right side, from the other side of the floor, he heard a strange creaking sound.

"So now you're blowing your way in?!"

The thick wall turned bright red. It was explosive fire.

The explosion from the next room over broke the wall into bits that pummeled Iska. The rubble was like machine gun fire, having been accelerated by the blast. It struck him in the shoulder, hard.

"Ow..."

"That's not all. This isn't all my legion can do."

Breaking apart the walls that separated the experimentation rooms, Mizerhyby leaped in from the dust, controlling five of her legion.

"Hellfire!"

A tidal wave of bright red flooded his vision. However, Iska had already seen this on the top floor. Before the fire could reach him, he cut through the void using his black astral sword.

Then there was an explosion. The fire split in two around Iska and charred the floor and walls.

"I almost died before. I kinda had no choice but to remember this hellfire."

He held his white astral sword in a backhanded grip. Iska raised it with his left hand, ripping up through space.

An astral release.

He released the hellfire that his black sword had intercepted. The tidal wave coursed Mizerhyby and her legion. It was a perfect recreation of it. The stronger the astral power, the stronger the white astral sword would be when its power was released.

"What an eyesore." Through the flames, the astral light of Dawn twinkled. "Tempest, blow him away!"

The greatest source of energy in this world came from a natural disaster—not lightning, not volcanic eruption, not even an earthquake, but a violent windstorm.

That storm became Mizerhyby's shield, extinguishing the hellfire. It pushed Iska back as he had tried to approach her, pressing him into the wall behind him.

“A wind barrier...so your legion’s even got defenses.”

“You puny little soldier! Stop making me try too hard. How much power will you force me to use just to get back my stolen earring...?!”

The witch’s hair stood on end as she stepped closer to him.

Her eyes and tone made her seem like a different person. Her expression had gone from exuding the gentleness of the spring sun to the harshness of the desert sun threatening to dry the vegetation.

“Die already.”

“You wish.” Iska forced himself up and wiped his bleeding lip with the back of his hand.

...*This princess.*

...*She’s impossibly strong.*

She was *too* fast. Having one purebred releasing five attacks wasn’t nearly as fast as five individuals attacking one at a time. That was what gave Mizerhyby’s Legion of Dawn so much value.

The Imperial forces had assumed they should simply be cautious of the threat Mizerhyby posed.

When she had a legion with her, however, she had to be one of the strongest powers in the Nebulis Sovereignty.

“Now I need to report another thing to headquarters. If I get home alive.”

He glared at each of the approaching six people in turn—Princess Mizerhyby and the formation of five subordinates to her sides.

“Attack—and don’t hold back. I do not mind even if you break the earring. Just obliterate that boy from here without a trace.” She swung her right hand. “Now!”

It all happened at once.

With Mizerhyby’s command, the five Legion of Dawn used all their astral power.

And Iska reacted to their attacks.

And then...

...The air exploded between them.

A whirlwind flashing with lightning blasted through the area suddenly. All the walls on the floor were riddled with holes and started to collapse.

“...What?!”

“Wh-what is this?!”

Iska and Mizerhyby both turned at the same time.

As it crackled, lightning raced low over the floor and the wind swept up the debris on the ground. Their vision was filled, turning a sandy color, and they couldn’t see much ahead of them.

...*This isn’t one of Mizerhyby’s legion. What just happened?*

...No, don't get distracted. There's no time to think!

Iska cut through the thick dust, narrowly avoiding a coughing fit, and launched himself off the ground before immediately starting to run. This wasn't the battlefield. Getting out of the building was the priority.

He turned away from Princess Mizerhyby and sprinted. He leaped out of the room in seconds and ran through the hallway with the twister pressing at his back.

As the wind kicked up clouds of dust, Iska passed by someone.

"Hmm?"

"...Huh?"

The two of them turned toward each other, but they could barely make each other out.

A researcher?

One of Mizerhyby's subordinates?

He had no way of finding out. Iska ran to the emergency stairs.



Snow and Sun. Central stairs. Fourth floor.

"That...senile sorcerer. When will he stop being so arrogant?!"

"Hmm? I was wondering who it was. It's you," Salinger sneered, looking down on the witch who yelled at him from far below.

He had spotted a redhead scowling at him. Her white thighs were exposed beneath the hem of her coat because she wasn't wearing anything under it.

He didn't recognize her.

But he did recognize her voice.

"Ha-ha, how comical. So you hastened to return to a human form? You wouldn't want to expose your disgraceful appearance to the researchers in this building, I suppose."

"Shut up and stay put. I'll come get you in no time!"

"Someone's cheeky."

Vichyssoise ran ferociously up the stairs. Salinger didn't wait for her. He raised his right hand, which glowed with astral light.

"I have grown tired of your face."

Water Mirror had the ability to transcend and boost the stolen astral powers to new levels.

—A Sanctus of lightning and wind.

The air seemed to writhe.

Earsplitting thunder boomed, and lightning blasted away the walls and the floor Vichyssoise stood on.

“Gah?!”

Wind and lightning. The unusual combination of these two astral powers made Vichyssoise even forget to breathe. The wind stopped her movements and the lightning assaulted her body.

“Disappear.”

“...I’ll have.....you remember...how...frightening...a true witch can be!”

Vichyssoise pitched down from the window.

But the electrical storm did not stop there. It brought down the walls between the rooms of the fifth floor, unilaterally striking the mercenaries employed by the Hydra with lightning.

Even the floors turned to dust.

“Was that her sad attempt at cursing me out?” Salinger scoffed at her last words and headed through the floor.

A cloud of dust greeted him.

He saw something else ahead, approaching him, before he had even walked a few steps.

Who was it? Someone frightfully agile.

When Salinger sensed the presence and turned toward it, it was already right in front of his eyes.

Whoever it was ran past him as fast as the wind.

All that was left was a swirl of dust and a vague memory of a humanoid shape.

Salinger had no desire to speculate. If soldiers came to him, he would show no forgiveness, but it went against his principles to pursue someone running past him.

More importantly...there was a more wonderful adversary waiting in his way within this building.

“That blue hair... Yes, I believe I remember hearing about it.”

He’d caught one look at the girl in the dust. His mouth turned up in a smirk. His laughter was derisive—a jeer.

“Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX. The successor of the Hydra, huh.”

“...I see I have another guest.” The girl combed her fingers through her bangs, like she wanted to show off her astral crest. “I won’t ask who you are. This might be the first time we’re meeting, but my dear uncle has told me so much about you. I was wondering where you could have gone after you disappeared from the prison spire.”

“Oh?”

“I suppose you’re after the Gregorian Descant? What if I told you it’s not here?” The stand-in for the head of household, Mizerhyby

touched her own ear. "It was stolen. By someone a step ahead of you."

"...What?"

"I almost had it back. Was that your astral power earlier? What a horrible nuisance it was."

"I see. Well then." The lips of the conspicuously beautiful man curled. "Then let my correct myself. Produce the *true* descant for me."

"Wha—?!"

"The experiments conducted by the Hydra produce the wildest of beasts. And the descant records them. You think I believe that you allowed that to be stolen? Don't play dumb. That was a replica with a fragment of what was recorded. What I want is the original."

The man looked down on the girl biting her lip. Though Mizerhyby was tall enough to be a model, the sorcerer was a whole head taller than her.

"....." She looked down, silently clenching her hands into fists.

And...

"Does everyone here *want* to get on my nerves?!"

Light exploded. Princess Mizerhyby's body stirred with a glimmer like a vortex. Her lapis lazuli hair whipped around in the wind.

"You wretched sorcerer! You *crawled* back into the real world, but you're nothing now. I'll show you where you stand compared to the royal bloodline!"

"I can't bear to even listen to you." The white-haired man issued an exasperated sigh in reply. "Dignity does not lie in blood but in principle. You grew overconfident with the strong astral powers that you were gifted at birth and have lost the desire to improve yourself. How is that royal?"

"Now you've said it."

"Let me tell you something. Don't speak back to me when you have *nothing* other than royal blood."

Salinger. The transcendental sorcerer.

What made him transcendental was his ambition to transcend the royalty.

There had only ever been one—only one person he considered an equal—a girl from thirty years ago. Other than that, he believed everyone else was below him.



“So, is the real descant on the top floor?”

“Like I’d let you leave. You end here!” shrieked the princess.

A wave of astral energy surged from the broken windows and shook Snow and Sun.

3

Nebulis Sovereignty. Suburbs of the central state.

The astral power research center was still burning and enveloped in smoke. Several hundred people who had sniffed out the commotion had gathered around the iron fencing surrounding the grounds. The rubberneckers approaching the place were largely news reporters and the military police who had come to control the situation. In addition to them was an assassin from the Zoa who had come to survey the destruction of the Hydra’s facility.

“I’ve arrived at the scene.”

“How does it look, Shanorotte?”

“Hmm...not good. All I can tell is that Snow and Sun is burning. And the top floor is especially horrendous. And the fifth floor, I think. There’s black smoke billowing out every window, but I can’t tell what’s happening at all.”

“And the sorcerer?”

“No signs of him. And the reporters are so noisy, I can’t tell what the military police are saying.”

She opened her palms like it was out of her hands. The woman with golden hair holding the communications device with a strained smile was Shanorotte Gregory.

The former Imperial captain of Special Defense Third Division. More accurately, the spy for the Zoa who had snuck her way into the Imperial forces. Her identity had been exposed at the Mudor Canyon, so she had returned home. Here she was now.

“And the Hydra’s staff? Do you see Mizerhyby, the next in line?”

“I really can’t say.” She twirled her permed hair around her finger. “There are witness reports of the sorcerer forcing his way into the building. They might be having a heroic battle, right now, throwing daggers and all that stuff.”

“That would be precious footage.”

“No, no, no. I can’t get into the building, and even if I could, someone as puny as me couldn’t face up to them.”

One was a descendant of the Founder. The other was a sorcerer who had attacked the previous queen. Shanorotte didn’t want to get involved in the fight.

“So, I propose withdrawing.”

“Someone’s eager to give up.”

“Think of it as a strategic retreat. I don’t think we have much to gain here with the rubbernecks around. At least not from the scene.”

She tucked the communications device away in her pocket and turned around, heading to the café where her subordinates were waiting. Just as she was about to head out, suddenly, she heard hurried footsteps coming from behind her from Snow and Sun.

“Captain, over here! We’re mingling into the crowd and leaving the suburbs.”

A boy’s voice.

And she heard several other footsteps immediately behind her as well.

“I—I know, but the crowd...”

“Are you okay, Captain?”

“Uh, uh-huh! I’m fine, you can keep running ahead of me, Iska! You’ve the most injured out of all of us, so you should go back to get them treated right away— Ah!”

“Whoa?!”

Someone had run into Shanorotte’s back.

They were trying to run through the crowd and likely hadn’t been paying attention to where they were going.

The other person was flung back from the impact. Shanorotte had a rather large build, after all, and she had trained up as a captain of the Imperial forces. A petite girl seemed to have run into her.

“Oh, sorry. I’m always told I have a big frame.”

She thought it was a child.

She turned and offered a hand.

“.....Huh?”

Shanorotte’s smile froze with her hand still held out. What she saw was a girl with light blue hair, an adorable baby face, and childlike limbs.

However...Shanorotte knew she was actually a fully grown adult, despite her appearance. That was because when Shanorotte had been a spy in the Imperial forces...

“...Mismis?”

“Huh? Noro?!” The girl who had turned to look at her also opened her eyes wide.

She, too, was part of the Imperial forces, one Mismis Klass from Unit 907. In the past, they had been colleagues and friends—or so Shanorotte had pretended to her sworn enemy.

“Noro...Where’s the...real Noro?”

“Ha-ha-ha, I can’t believe it. Shanorotte Gregory was born and raised

in the Nebulis Sovereignty. I've been the one and only Shanorotte since you and I met."

Why?

Why was an Imperial commander in the Sovereignty, and why in the central state?

"Mismis!" She reached her hand out in a daze. She couldn't understand what had led to this, but an Imperial commander was an enemy no less. She reached out to grab Mismis's collar.

"Hey, boss, over here."

"Uh, uh-huh!" Mismis came back to her senses and immediately made a break for it. She took advantage of her small stature, slipping through the gaps of the crowd to get away.



With her large frame, Shanorotte couldn't pull such a feat herself.

"W-wait! Catch that woman! She's an Imperial subject!"

Not a single person reacted.

Shanorotte's voice disappeared into the noise around her. The military police had their hands full dealing with Snow and Sun.

Unable to do anything, the spy, Shanorotte, could only watch as the back of her former colleague from her Imperial days got smaller and smaller.

EPILOGUE 1



Why Does This Keep Happening?!

“Humph. It seems you’ve survived, Imperial swordsman.”

As soon as Rin saw him, she clucked her tongue in contempt. That had happened just as soon as Iska had settled onto the sofa to rest upon returning to the hotel room. Rin had come racing over from the palace. Upon her arrival, she threw a paper bag at him.

“Take it.”

“H-hey?! Didn’t you hear that I’m injured?!”

“That contains disinfectant for burn wounds as well as pain pills.”

“...Thanks.”

He meekly took the bag. She must have bought those things at a pharmacy before coming over to the hotel. They were all brand-new and fully sealed.

“I’ll send you an invoice later.”

“What?!”

“I kid.”

“...Could you not say that with a deadpan voice?” He let out a big sigh.

Rin took a look around the living room. “Nami and Sistia are safe, correct?”

“They’re doing fine, just like our message said. They’re changing in the next room. Commander Mismis is with them, so they should be back soon.”

“Okay,” Rin said and nodded, and then she folded her arms and looked up at the ceiling. “...I’ve reported that to Lady Alice as well. That while you weren’t able to locate Lady Sisbell, you did find her attendant taken captive in the underground level.”

“Yeah, we have photos for evidence.”

“That should help Lady Alice. She’ll be mobilized to do a compulsory investigation by Her Majesty. The servants of the Lou were captured by the Hydra. Once this incident has come to light, that should shake up Talisman’s foothold.”

But it still wasn’t definitive. The Hydra had been the masterminds that invited the Imperial forces into the Sovereignty—and until that

was made clear, it meant nothing.

“So, there was something that bothered me. What’s going on with Snow and Sun? The TV broadcast didn’t show the outskirts of the grounds.”

“There was a fire in a building. Astral powers should disappear after a few minutes. I’d be surprised if that had all been astral power.”

“All those flames likely came from the princess.”

Iska meant the stand-in for the head of household, Mizerhyby. Her Legion of Dawn included a flame astral mage. Iska had witnessed a fire like he’d never before seen decimate an entire floor.

“I wish you’d told us more about Princess Mizerhyby.”

“Hmm?”

“She was ridiculously powerful. She wasn’t *just* powering up others’ astral powers.”

“Obviously.”

Why was he saying that now? Rin seemed to ask. She looked nonplussed.

“Talisman is attempting to back her for the conclave. It’s likely she will vie with Lady Alice for the queen’s throne in the future.”

“In that case, you really should have—”

“You think the Hydra would reveal their hand? Even if Lady Alice and I know the general gist of Mizerhyby’s astral power, we didn’t know her actual skills.”

“...I see.”

The royal family of the Nebulis Sovereignty fought blood for blood with their own family. Until they could capture the throne, they wouldn’t give the other royal families the advantage of knowing intel about them in advance. Mizerhyby’s astral power was part of that.

“And I have one more thing to ask,” Rin said. “What happened to *him*? If you broke into that building, I’m sure you must have seen him.”

“Him?”

“Salinger, obviously.”

“...So about that.” Iska shook his head. “Was that really Salinger? You’re absolutely sure?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well...I heard the servants say his name, too,” Iska said. “But when I got to the top floor, there was an explosion on the grounds.”

“So you didn’t see him?”

“I didn’t see any sign of him at all.”

The transcendental sorcerer’s appearance had been burned into his mind. He wouldn’t miss the man if they had run into each other in the building.

“You’re sure you’re not mistaken? You’re sure it wasn’t someone

else?”

“Humph...” Now Rin was the one scowling. “The queen did tell us that she doubted his involvement. I can find out by retrieving the data from the surveillance cameras of Snow and Sun... Well, no matter. So, anyway.”

She turned partly around, looking bitter. “I’ve been wondering, what are those two doing?”

She glanced pointedly at the table in the back.

Nene and Jhin were silently fast at work. The two of them were so absorbed in what they were doing, they didn’t even hear Iska and Rin’s conversation.

“Jhin, you done yet?”

“Don’t rush me. We’re trying to pry the thing open. It’s over if we crush the contents by being too rough.”

Jhin held a sun-shaped earring, driving a screwdriver tip as thin as a needle into the metal fitting and slowly jimmying open its top.

“Again, Iska: What are those two doing?”

Just as Rin scowled, the two in the back started shouting.

“All right, it’s open.”

“Whoa! You’re amazing!”

“Well, let’s see what’s inside... Yeah, looks like a memory chip. Just like we thought. I’ve got no idea what’s in this IC chip, but the rest is up to you, Nene.”

“You got it.” Nene inserted the thin chip—small enough to rest on her pinkie finger—into a portable device. She looked at the writing displayed on the monitor. “Hmm...”

“How’s it look?”

“So based on what I know, it looks like there are two fishy files encrypted here. This might be too difficult for me without help from the analysis squad at HQ. I think I can only figure out how to open one of these right now.”

“Wait, is one of them not encrypted?”

“That’s right. There’s only one file that was made by someone else. I think the Hydra must have just acquired the data from someone, and they were going to delete it right away.”

Jhin and Nene stared at the monitor.

A map featuring a continent was displayed on it. An arrow starting from the Nebulis Sovereignty’s central state began to move, going straight across to the Sovereignty’s border.

“Nene, what’s that number on the arrow? I can tell it’s binary with all the ones and zeros.”

“I think it might be a date and time. In that case, they left last night from the central state and got outside the border this morning. It has to be a plane based on how fast it’s going, so they must be

carrying something.”

“Hmm? Hey, Nene, isn’t this arrow entering Imperial territory?” Jhin murmured.

At that moment, Rin’s eyes snapped open. “W-wait?! Let me check...!”

She rushed past Jhin and Nene, breaking between them to bring her face close to the monitor. She stared at the map and the arrow, not even sparing a blink.

“...I can’t believe it,” her voice rasped as it slipped out from between her lips. “But there shouldn’t be an airport in this spot in the central state.”

“Huh?! B-but?”

“The starting point is at the Hydra’s estate. If they flew a private plane out, then they must have been carrying... They couldn’t have been...”

Shuvalts had been at Snow and Sun, but Sisbell had not. And just yesterday, a plane left from the Sovereignty carrying *something*.

Considering the situation...

The youngest princess must have been carried to Imperial territory.

Everyone fell silent.

It wasn’t a hypothetical scenario. They were nearly close to fully believing it.

“...We were a step behind.” Rin bit her lip. “We found her attendant there, which we’re using as a pretext to search the Hydra’s base... Then he must have decided to move her prior to the search. Curse you, Talisman.”

“But it looks like the arrow isn’t headed to the Imperial capital. It’s somewhere way in the countryside.”

Jhin sighed. “The Empire’s our home, as far as we’re concerned. We can’t just liberate a witch from Imperial territory or we’ll be in hot water. That’s treason and exactly what Iska got in trouble for a year ago.”

“_____”

What do you wanna do? Jhin silently asked. Rin gritted her teeth in front of him.

“We must rescue Sisbell. There is no questioning that. I cannot give that up.”

“I get it. But as Imperial citizens, we can’t infiltrate anything within Imperial territory. That’d be as good as rebelling against our home country. Am I right, Commander?”

“...Y-yeah. I think it would be hard for us to help you directly,

too.”

Commander Mismis and Nene also weakly agreed.

The Sovereignty was an enemy country as far as Unit 907 was concerned. Causing mayhem in an enemy base wouldn't count as rebellion, so they had been able to work with Sisbell and Alice until that point.

But this next gambit was another matter.

...Unit 907 has its own position to think about.

...We can't ever cause trouble in Imperial territory, not even if it's to rescue Sisbell.

So Talisman had even calculated this.

Taking Sisbell into Imperial territory meant Imperial soldiers like Iska—not to mention the queen of the Nebulis—couldn't do anything.

“If I could butt in...” Rin, who had been silent until then, raised her bitter-looking face. “I have a proposal. Commander Mismis.”

“Y-yes?!”

When Rin mentioned her by name, the commander's voice cracked.

“We weren't able to recover Lady Sisbell, but I will make good on our initial negotiations and will deliver you from the Sovereignty. In exchange, I would like you to make a final deal with me.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“I will send a spy to tail you. And you will return to the Imperial territory without noticing the spy.”

“.....Excuse me?” Commander Mismis's eyes were open in surprise.

She would have a spy tailing them. That made sense for the Sovereignty to do. But how were they supposed to not notice the spy? And if she didn't want them to notice the spy, why had she mentioned there being one? Iska and Nene looked at each other and shook their heads.

“I see what you're thinking.” The silver-haired sniper smirked slightly. “I got it. That's something we can just barely agree to, considering our position. But this really is our last deal together.”

“So you figured it out,” Rin replied.

“Basically, it'll go like this.” Jhin turned to Iska and the others. “We'll head out of the Sovereignty and back to Imperial territory. That's not too different from the plan. But before we reach the Imperial capital, we'll *happen to go by the place Sisbell's being held*. The spy that followed us will probably go find Sisbell then.”

All they would do was head back to the Imperial capital.

The plan was that one of Alice's spies would find where Sisbell was being held by chance.

“Oh...I see.” Iska finally realized it, too.

They wouldn't do anything. All they would do was tolerate Alice's spy accompanying them.

"Commander, what do you think?"

"...I think that's barely within reason for us to accept. Considering I'm sure we won't be able to leave the Sovereignty unless we accept, I think we can agree to this." Still hesitant, Mismis turned toward Rin. "But, Miss Rin, if that spy fails to rescue Miss Sisbell, we can't get involved. All we can do is tolerate that the spy will tail us. We can't betray the Empire any more than that..."

"And I wouldn't ask for anything more. We will simply do that no matter what." Rin immediately pulled out a communications device.

"We just need Lady Alice's approval and the deal is done. Lady Alice, I apologize for calling at such a busy time. I have a report. It's about where Lady Sisbell was taken," the attendant told her, seeming full of nerves.

Iska watched her answer several questions.

"...I understand the situation." Alice's voice came faintly from the comm. *"Rin, we shall go through with the deal as you have outlined it. We will rescue Sisbell. I would love to rush there immediately, but..."*

"It would be bad if you were to mobilize now, Lady Alice."

"Yes, that's exactly what the Hydra are aiming for. I can't leave the queen on her own," Alice answered.

Iska heard her voice fill with dignity befitting a princess. It was a tone that only he knew.

"I will stay at the palace, so I give the task of rescuing my sister to someone I trust."

"However, Lady Alice, the spy's mission will be of utmost importance. Now that we know the situation, the only one who could rescue Lady Sisbell from an Imperial facility would be—"

"I'm counting on you."

"...Come again?" Rin was taken aback. If her expression were to be compared to anything, it looked as though she had seen a flying whale. She gaped from stupefaction. "Lady Alice, um, what did you just say?"

"This is my precious sister. I can only leave this to someone I can trust."

"I—I assent! But my idea was...to have one of the queen's guards or a member of the palace Planetary Domiciles who isn't busy..."

"That won't work." Her mistress's reply was merciless. *"There are certain conditions that must be met to have a spy go through with this mission. One is that they must know they are an Imperial unit. We say you'll be tailing them, but you'll actually be traveling with them. You need to know each other."*

"———" Rin's face quickly paled.

Yes. There was only one person who could fulfill the conditions of her lady.

“...Um, Lady Alice.”

“*What is it?*”

“As you are well aware, I despise the Empire. Simply seeing the Imperial territories on a world map is enough to give me goose bumps. And you expect me to go *to* the Empire...”

“*You must go, Rin!*” Alice yelled. “*You must go to the Empire with Iska in order to save my sister. This order is an honor, and it’s something only you are capable of!*”

“Nooooo!” Rin’s face turned tomato red as her yell echoed throughout the hotel room’s living area.

EPILOGUE 2



Most Volatile Rage in the World

The underground area was even bluer than the sky.

The Nebulis palace. Isolated block.

The wide corridor made use of a natural limestone cave. Water dripped down from above, echoing through the space.

A blue underground lake. The spring was clear. There was a blue glitter even farther down below the water. The astral energy that welled up from underground was being transported by the subterranean lake, which gave the water its blue hue.

Clack. A hard footfall echoed against the rugged slope.

The footsteps continued down a bridge laid across the lake's surface. A gigantic glass coffin, put in safekeeping at the end of the bridge, towered over the place.

Inside the clear coffin was a girl, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age.

"Revered Founder."

A masked man bowed to her.

He was served by only two palace guards. Lord Mask, who represented the head of household, slowly headed toward the glass coffin.

"The time has come. The opportunity for you to awaken is coming."

He looked up at the girl with sun-bronzed skin and wavy pearlescent hair. Her features as she slumbered still looked young and charming.

However...Lord Mask knew the world's most horrific grudge slumbered within her, the one who looked like only a girl at first glance.

The Founder Nebulis.

In the past, she had turned the Imperial capital into a sea of

flames. She was the strongest and oldest astral mage. While the Empire called all astral mages witches, she was the only one that the Empire called the Grand Witch.

“Though the Lou family’s retainers, led by the current queen, oppose us, we have many methods of overcoming obstacles.”

He removed one of the metal padlocks keeping the casket closed. Then another. He continued undoing the locks one after another, casting them below into the lake.

Then he unbolted the last one.

He looked down at the lock that featured the queen’s symbol and smirked.

“The most merciless wrath in the world. A wrath to annihilate the Empire.”

The Founder and her descendants.

The oldest and newest witches converged toward a new chaotic era.

Afterword

The morning has broken on the night of the witch hunt.

Thank you for picking up *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World*, Volume 8.

The theme for this volume was “omens.”

Following the battles between Saint Disciples and purebreds in the previous volume, the Empire and Sovereignty are approaching the dawn of a new age—and major upheaval. The captured Founder’s descendants are hauled off to the Empire. In the Sovereignty, the princess of the Hydra has joined in on the battle. With that, the princesses of the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra have each been introduced and will be wagering in the conclave to become the next queen!

And next time...we’ll peer into the forbidden secrets of the Empire.

After Unit 907 returns to the Empire to rescue Sisbell, they see... Well, you’ll see. Another Imperial secret will be unveiled.

We’re chugging forward full force, so I hope you have high expectations!

(Especially those who are Team Sisbell.)

All right...that’s enough about this volume. Let’s get into announcements.

As announced two months ago at the Fantasia Bunko Appreciation Festival 2019...*Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World* is going to get an anime adaptation!

The details are still in the works. I’m just grateful to be able to deliver this information. This series originally came out on the ten-year anniversary of my debut, so I’ve put a lot of thought into it. And I’ve grown attached to it, too, of course.

When it was announced, people flooded my Twitter; I’ve never gotten so much engagement for my past announcements... I really do think this series is so wonderful.

Thank you very, very much.

I hope I’ll be able to follow up with more information about the anime.

I will be sharing as much as I can on my Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/sazanek>), so I hope you'll check it out every once in a while!

More adaptations! Volume 3 of okama's manga adaptation will also come out at the same time as this volume.

There might be special bonuses at the fair; please refer to the official Twitter account for details.

Unfortunately, I'm writing the afterword before the fair, but I hope I'll be able to make an announcement on Twitter when this hits the shelves!

(What a strange feeling putting this on my future self...)

It's now time to talk about my concurrent series.

When we confirmed the anime adaptation for this series, I had many readers tell me that they "also support the other series!" ...and I was so happy to hear that. I'd like to thank you all here.

I've written several longer series, and I hope I can cherish each one of them, not just this one.

I'd be so happy if you would support the following stories as well!

▼ *Why Does No One Remember My World?*

Volume 7 is out! (I should be able to announce the eighth volume soon, too!)

The manga adaptation is being published in *Monthly Comic Alive*.

▼ *Encore at the End of the World*

Ten volumes total. The manga adaptation is also being published in *Monthly Comic Alive*.

You can read either of the manga adaptations on *Nico Nico Seiga* or *ComicWalker* for free. I hope you enjoy them!

And finally...

Since *Last Crusade* is officially getting an anime, I've had so many people from the Fantasia, especially the editorial department, who supported me.

I would like to express my appreciation in this space.

To my old editor K (for helping me lay out the plan for this series.)

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. They came to the anime announcement at the fair, which made me so happy. I'm still thrilled to think they were watching over little old me!

To my current editor S.

I was a little panicked when I heard that I'd be changing editors

from the one I had been working with...but when I heard it was you, S, I felt genuine relief. And I was surprised in a good way (lol).

Once again, I look forward to working with you.

* Those who know my old series might recognize this person as the editor of *Frozen Mirror World Eden* and *Imperfect Divine Machine Illis*.

To my current editor, Y.

Thank you for your help during the fair and for your daily work on this series!

You're the one that I've fallen to the most; you're the busiest one among us, working on all things related to *Last Crusade*. The anime is still a long distance away, but I would be so happy if you would run the great lengths with me!

(Oh, but I hope that you don't push yourself too hard.)

To the illustrator, Ao Nekonabe.

The illustration of Alice in a kimono for the fair was beautiful!

And Mizerhyby on the cover of this volume is gorgeous. I am stoked whenever I get the black and white illustrations and color inserts. I know I'm jumping the gun, but I'm looking forward to seeing your designs for Alice and Iska moving on screen!

And...I would like to introduce the anime staff, but I think I have to keep that a secret to reveal next time.

I'm almost out of space for the afterword.

Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World, Volume 9 will continue the tale of the swordsman Iska and the witch princess Alice.

Their stage has moved to the Empire and is accelerating even faster. There is much to expect from the next part of the story and many secrets and encounters that will be involved. (And, of course, Rin's adventures in the Empire).

Why Does No One Remember My World, Volume 8 is coming out in winter of 2020. I hope we will meet again in *Last Crusade*, Volume 9, which is slated for early spring.

On an afternoon at the end of fall,

Kei Sazane

Announcement:
VOLUME 9

I've remembered
a name I'd rather
forget...

The name of
a dangerous
woman. If you
don't catch her,
she will be a
threat to the
Empire.

Unit 907 is on their way
to the Empire, following
the traces of Sisbell, the
youngest princess of the
Nebulis Sovereignty. On
their way, they uncover a
secret side to their
home country...

Meanwhile, the Nebulis
Sovereignty is under
a new threat.

Reflecting in the eyes of
Iska, Alice, and Sisbell is
something words fail
to describe...

*In the ninth act of the story between the witch and the
swordsman...the most dangerous secret on the planet
emerges from the dust.*

❖ The content of this book is subject
to change without advance notice.

Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World*
OR THE RISE OF A

VOLUME 9

Coming soon

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